

People reject popular opinions if they already hold opposing views, study finds

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What would happen if you developed a strong opinion on an issue, and later found that the majority of people disagreed with you?

You might think that such a revelation would encourage you to rethink your beliefs. But a new study suggests people often react just the opposite: people grow more confident in some beliefs when they find out later that a majority of people disagree with them.

"It may be that you feel proud because you were able to disprove, in your own mind, an opinion that most people have accepted," said Richard Petty, co-author of the study and professor of [psychology](#) at Ohio State University.

"You actually become doubly sure you were right."

Petty conducted the study with Pablo Brinol, a former postdoctoral fellow at Ohio State, and Javier Horcago, both at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid in Spain. Their results appear online in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and will be published in a future print edition.

The research continues a long tradition in psychology of examining how people are influenced by majority or minority opinion on a subject, Petty said.

Previous research has shown that majority opinion has the greatest

influence on people when they consider issues that aren't that important to them or issues they don't want to spend much effort thinking about.

"If a decision isn't important, it often seems easiest to just go along with what everybody else is thinking," Petty said.

Minority opinion does have influence sometimes, but mostly on issues which people are motivated to consider carefully.

However, previous work had focused on situations in which people found out the majority opinion before they had given the issue much thought. Petty and his co-authors approached it from a different angle: what happens when people find out the majority opinion on an issue after they've already thought about the issue themselves?

The researchers did a series of related experiments involving undergraduate students in Spain. In one key experiment, students were told they would be examining the organizational conditions of an unfamiliar international company where they might be able to work for a future internship.

Participants were given either strong or weak arguments in favor of the firm. (One strong argument was that workers reported high satisfaction because of the flexibility of their work schedules. One weak argument was that the logo of the company was very attractive.)

After hearing either the strong or the weak arguments, the students were asked to list their thoughts about the company. As expected, students presented the weak arguments generated negative thoughts about the company, while those presented strong arguments generated positive thoughts.

At that point, half the students were told that 86 percent of their fellow

students supported the company, while the other half were told only 14 percent supported the company.

After learning whether the majority of their fellow students agreed or disagreed with their analysis of the company, the students were asked to rate how confident they were in the positive or negative thoughts they had listed, and then rated their attitude toward the company.

Results showed that when students had a negative view of the company because of the weak arguments presented, they were actually more confident in this belief when they learned the majority of their fellow students disagreed with them and had positive views of the company (as opposed to when the majority agreed with their negative views).

"People may be thinking that 'if I can find the flaws in a position that the majority of people believe, then my thoughts must really be good ones,'" Petty said.

One key to this finding is that people have to think about the issue first, and develop their own ideas, Petty said. Learning later that a majority of people hold a certain view, after you have already made up your mind, functions to help you validate what you already think about that issue, Petty said.

The results suggest how would-be persuaders could strategically reveal the majority or minority status of a proposal to achieve the maximum persuasive effect.

If you feel you have a weak argument, it should be best to suggest right away that a lot of people support your issue, before you make your case. In that case, you're hoping that the majority endorsement will prevent people from counterarguing. People will rely on the "wisdom of the crowd" to guide their thoughts, without actually considering the issue,

Petty explained.

If you tell people you have majority support after you make your weak arguments, it is too late - it will only serve to give people confidence in the [negative thoughts](#) they have generated about your cause, Petty said.

But for those with a strong argument, it can be helpful to reveal wide support for your proposal after explaining it, as this gives people confidence in the positive thoughts they have generated to your strong arguments, Petty said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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