

Scandals and the public's trust in politicians: assimilation and contrast effects

Bless, Herbert; Schwarz, Norbert

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Scandals and the Public's Trust in Politicians: Assimilation and Contrast Effects

Norbert Schwarz

Zentrum für Umfragen,

Methoden und Analysen, Mannheim, Germany

Herbert Bless

Universität Mannheim

Subjects either were or were not asked to recall the names of politicians who had been involved in a scandal and subsequently evaluated the trustworthiness of politicians in general and of three specific exemplars. Answering the scandal question decreased judgments of trustworthiness of politicians in general but increased perceived trustworthiness of specific exemplars. Thus, an assimilation effect was obtained when the target category "politicians in general" invited inclusion of the scandal politicians in the temporary representation formed of the target. In contrast, the primed politicians could not be included in the representations formed of specific individuals. In this case, they were used as a standard of comparison, resulting in contrast effects. These findings are consistent with the inclusion/exclusion model of assimilation and contrast effects, which emphasizes the role of categorization processes in the construction of targets and standards.

The public's trust in government has received great attention in political science (see Erikson, Luttbeg, & Tedin, 1988, for a review) because of the conviction that "a democratic system can not survive for long without the support of a majority of its citizens" (Miller, 1974, p. 951). Empirically, Americans' trust in government showed a dramatic decline between 1960 and 1980, followed by a slight increase between 1980 and 1984 (Erikson et al., 1988). This decline was particularly pronounced between 1972 and 1974 with regard to the belief that "government will do the right thing." As Erikson et al. (1988, p. 117) note, "The most plausible explanation is Watergate. Daily accusations of break-ins, slush funds, wiretapping, extortion, cover ups, etc., are not designed to encourage enthusiasm for government."

Despite the plausibility of this assertion, little is known about the impact of political scandals on citizens' trust

in politicians. Although we may safely assume that political scandals undermine the trustworthiness of politicians who are involved in them, the degree to which scandals reduce trust in politicians in general is an open issue. Moreover, it is conceivable that politicians who were not involved in the scandal may benefit from the misdemeanor of their peers, who may serve as an extreme anchor, relative to which other politicians may appear rather trustworthy.

In the present study, we explored these issues by increasing the cognitive accessibility of politicians who were involved in a recent scandal in West Germany, the so-called Barschel Scandal, which bears some resemblance to the Watergate scandal in the United States. Specifically, we asked some of our respondents to name politicians who were involved in this scandal, whereas no scandal-related question was asked of the remaining respondents. Subsequently, we assessed respondents' trust in politicians of the Federal Republic of Germany in general, as well as their trust in three specific politicians who were not involved in the scandal and whom pretests had shown to be perceived as of average trustworthiness. Naming politicians who were involved in the scandal should increase the likelihood that these politicians come to mind when respondents are later asked to evaluate politicians' trustworthiness (see Bodenhausen & Wyer,

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1987), and the impact of this increased accessibility on evaluations of politicians in general and of specific exemplars is of key interest. We conceptualize this impact in terms of a recent theoretical model that specifies the conditions under which a given piece of information results in assimilation or contrast effects, emphasizing the role of categorization processes (see Schwarz & Bless, *in press*, for a more detailed discussion).

Specifically, we assume that evaluative judgments require a mental representation of the particular target and a representation of a standard against which the target is evaluated. Both the representation of the target and that of the standard include information that is chronically accessible as well as information that is only temporarily accessible—for example, because it was needed to answer a preceding question (see Schwarz & Strack, 1991). Information that is *included* in the temporary representation that subjects form of the target category results in assimilation effects. This simply reflects that the judgment is based on the representation formed. Empirically, assimilation effects can be observed only if the implications of the temporarily accessible information are more extreme than the implications of other information used in constructing the representation of the target category. If the information that comes to mind is *not* included in the representation of the target category but bears on the dimension of the judgment, it may be used in constructing a standard of comparison, or scale anchor, resulting in contrast effects. Empirically, contrast effects can be observed only if the implications of the temporarily accessible information are more extreme than the implications of other information used in constructing the standard. The assumptions of this inclusion/exclusion model are compatible with recent research in cognitive psychology (see Barsalou, 1987, 1989; Kahneman & Miller, 1986) and provide a coherent framework for the conceptualization of a large number of variables known to moderate the emergence of assimilation and contrast effects (Schwarz & Bless, *in press*).

According to the model, *any* variable that determines the categorization of information, and hence its inclusion in or exclusion from the temporary representation formed of the target category, may moderate the emergence of assimilation or contrast effects. Such variables include the perceived representativeness of the primed information for the target category (e.g., Strack, Schwarz, & Gschneidinger, 1985, Experiment 1), awareness of the priming episode (e.g., Lombardi, Higgins, & Bargh, 1987; Strack, Schwarz, Bless, Kübler, & Wänke, *in press*), the spacing of items in a questionnaire (e.g., Ottati, Riggall, Wyer, Schwarz, & Kuklinski, 1989), conversational norms that govern the use of primed information (e.g., Schwarz, Strack, & Mai, 1991; Strack, Martin, &

Schwarz, 1988), and a host of related variables (see Schwarz & Bless, *in press*).

In the present study, we will focus on a variable that is of considerable methodological importance in the analysis of scandal impact: the width of the target category. We could, for example, ask respondents to evaluate the trustworthiness of politicians in general or of a specific politician who was not involved in the scandal. What would the model predict for these dependent variables of differential category width? Other things being equal, a given piece of information should be more likely to be included in the temporary representation formed of the target category the wider that category is, resulting in an assimilation effect. Conversely, the more narrow the target category, the less likely it is that a given piece of information will be included in the representation formed of it. Hence this information will be available for constructing a standard of comparison, or scale anchor, resulting in contrast effects.

This reasoning suggests that naming politicians who were involved in a scandal should decrease respondents' evaluation of the trustworthiness of politicians in general. According to the inclusion/exclusion model, the politicians involved in the scandal are members of the general target category "politicians" and are therefore likely to be included in subjects' temporary representation of that category. If so, their evaluation of the trustworthiness of politicians in general should decrease. Suppose, however, that subjects are not asked to evaluate the trustworthiness of politicians in general but the trustworthiness of a specific politician, Mr. Joe Doe, who was not involved in the scandal. We may assume that in evaluating a specific person, this person makes up a category by himself or herself. If so, the politicians who were involved in the scandal should not be included in subjects' representation of Joe Doe. Rather, these politicians may be used in constructing a standard, or scale anchor, against which Joe Doe is evaluated. If so, Joe Doe may seem particularly trustworthy by comparison, reflecting a contrast effect. Thus, the inclusion/exclusion model of assimilation and contrast effects (Schwarz & Bless, *in press*) predicts that thinking about a political scandal may decrease judgments of the trustworthiness of politicians in general but may increase judgments of the trustworthiness of specific exemplars of the category. (Obviously, variables such as the representativeness of a specific politician of the category as a whole or subjects' party preference may also influence the categorization of specific exemplars, and we will address these variables in the discussion of our findings.)

In addition to testing these implications of the inclusion/exclusion model, we explored the emergence of carry-over effects from a first judgment to a related second

judgment. Research in social cognition suggests that individuals who have already formed a judgment are unlikely to start from scratch when asked to make a second, related judgment. Rather, they are likely to derive the second judgment from the implications of the first one, without reconsidering the original information used in making the initial judgment (Carlston, 1980; Wyer & Srull, 1989). Applied to the current study, this assumption suggests that subjects who are first asked to rate the trustworthiness of politicians in general may subsequently base their evaluation of specific politicians on the implications of their general judgment, concluding that the specific politicians presented to them are probably not very trustworthy as well. Conversely, those who think about the scandal and then evaluate the trustworthiness of three specific politicians as relatively high may subsequently conclude that politicians in general are relatively trustworthy as well. Thus, thinking about the scandal may result in assimilation or contrast effects on subjects' first judgment, and the implications of the first judgment may then be used to derive the second one.

METHOD

Subjects

Because all politicians who were involved in the Barschel Scandal were members of the Christian Democratic party, whereas the victims in this scandal were Social Democrats, it seemed desirable to avoid any potential impact of subjects' party preference in testing predictions of the inclusion/exclusion model. For that reason, participation in the present study was restricted to subjects who had reported not having a party preference in response to a question asked in an earlier, unrelated study. Thirty-two students at the University of Mannheim, Germany, who fulfilled this requirement participated.

Procedure

Subjects were randomly assigned to experimental conditions, according to a 2 (Scandal Question: asked vs. not asked) \times 2 (Judgment Type: general vs. specific) \times 2 (Judgment Order) factorial design.

Subjects who were assigned to the *scandal question asked* condition were first asked,

Do you happen to remember the names of the politicians who were involved in the so-called Barschel scandal? If so, please write them down.

For subjects assigned to the *scandal question not asked* condition, this question was the last question in the questionnaire.

TABLE 1: Judgments of the Trustworthiness of Politicians in General and of Three Exemplars as a Function of Sequence of Judgments and Having Been Asked About a Scandal

<i>Sequence and Target</i>	<i>Question Not Asked</i>	<i>Question Asked</i>
First judgment		
General	5.0	3.4
Specific	4.9	5.6
Second judgment		
General	4.1	5.5
Specific	4.0	3.5

NOTE: $n = 8$ per cell. Judgments could range from 1, not at all trustworthy, to 11, very trustworthy.

Subsequently, subjects evaluated the trustworthiness of politicians in the Federal Republic of Germany in general (*general judgment*) and the trustworthiness of three specific politicians (Friedrich Zimmermann, Norbert Blüm, and Hans-Jochen Vogel; *specific judgment*) along 11-point scales (1 = *not at all trustworthy*; 11 = *very trustworthy*). The order in which the general and the specific judgments were assessed was reversed for half the subjects.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

All subjects could name at least two politicians who were involved in the scandal. Analyses that treated the three specific judgments as three levels of a within-subjects factor did not reveal an interaction effect of the experimental manipulation with the specific individual who was to be evaluated, $F < 1$. Accordingly, a summary variable was computed, and the mean of the three specific judgments is used in the analyses reported below.

First Judgment

The upper part of Table 1 shows the first judgment provided by subjects as a function of the experimental conditions.

Not surprisingly, thinking about the scandal decreased subjects' judgments of the trustworthiness of politicians in general ($M = 3.4$), relative to subjects who had not been asked the scandal question ($M = 5.0$), $F(1, 28) = 4.45$, $p < .05$, for the simple main effect. Thus, an assimilation effect emerged when the first judgment pertained to the category of politicians in general, presumably reflecting the inclusion of politicians who were involved in the scandal in subjects' temporary representation of the target category.

Not so, however, when the first judgment pertained to specific persons. In that case, subjects reported *higher*

trust in the three target politicians ($M = 5.6$) when they had previously answered the scandal question than when they had not ($M = 4.9$), $F(1, 28) = 3.60$, $p < .08$, for the simple main effect. This presumably reflects that the politicians who were brought to mind by the scandal question influenced subjects' standard of comparison. Overall, this pattern of results is reflected in a significant interaction of thinking about the scandal and type of first judgment, $F(1, 28) = 8.18$, $p < .008$.

Second Judgment

The lower part of Table 1 shows subjects' second judgment. As expected on the basis of Carlston's (1980) findings, subjects used the implications of their first judgment to derive their second one. Accordingly, subjects who had concluded that politicians in general are not very trustworthy assigned somewhat lower ratings to the three specific politicians presented to them ($M = 3.5$) than subjects who were not induced to think about the scandal ($M = 4.0$), although this difference was not reliable, $F < 1$. However, subjects who had reported high trust in the three specific exemplars subsequently reported higher trust in politicians in general as well ($M = 5.5$) than subjects who did not think about the scandal ($M = 4.1$), $F(1, 28) = 4.63$, $p < .05$.

This pattern of results is reflected in a significant interaction of thinking about the scandal question and type of second judgment, $F(1, 28) = 4.82$, $p < .04$. That evaluations of specific politicians affected subsequent evaluations of politicians in general more strongly than the reverse presumably reflects that information about individual members bears in a more direct way on the evaluation of a composite category than information about a composite category bears on any specific individual exemplar (see Schwarz & Bless, in press).

Finally, the two simple interactions described above are reflected in a nonsignificant triple interaction of thinking about the scandal and type and order of judgments, $F(1, 28) = 2.28$, $p = .14$.

DISCUSSION

In summary, thinking about the politicians who were involved in the Barschel scandal decreased subjects' evaluation of the trustworthiness of politicians in general but increased their evaluation of the trustworthiness of specific politicians who were not involved in the scandal, as predicted by the inclusion/exclusion model of assimilation and contrast effects (Schwarz & Bless, in press). Once subjects made their first judgment, however, they used the implications of this judgment to derive a second, related one, resulting in carryover effects. These findings have methodological, substantive, and theoretical implications, which we will discuss in turn.

From a methodological point of view, the current findings illustrate the context dependency of public opinion measurement (see Hippler, Schwarz, & Sudman, 1987; Schwarz & Strack, 1991; Schwarz & Sudman, 1992; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988, for reviews). As a comparison of the first and second judgments indicates, a survey researcher who is interested in the impact of a political scandal on the public's trust in politicians may conclude that thinking about a political scandal either decreases or increases trust in politicians in general and either decreases or increases trust in specific exemplars, depending on the order in which the questions are asked. Thus, the substantive conclusions one would draw are in large part a function of the structure of the questionnaire, emphasizing the applied importance of the emergence of assimilation and contrast effects in substantive empirical research.

From a substantive point of view, the present findings indicate that political scandals may have a differential impact on the perceived trustworthiness of the political class and of specific politicians. Whereas political scandals are likely to decrease trust in politicians in general, they may increase trust in specific politicians, as predicted by the inclusion/exclusion model. Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that political scandals are typically accompanied by attempts to channel the public's categorization of scandal-related information (see Ebbighausen & Neckel, 1989, for discussions of scandal management). To the extent that individual politicians (or groups of politicians) can dissociate themselves from the scandal, they may actually benefit from the misdemeanor of their peers, although the impact on the perception of the profession as a whole is likely to be negative.

Note, however, that the real-world impact of any scandal is likely to be complicated by variables that we deliberately excluded from consideration in the present study by restricting participation to subjects who did not report a strong party preference. For example, individuals with a strong partisan orientation may not form a representation of politicians in general to begin with, but may categorize politicians on the basis of their party membership, thus limiting the observed effects to evaluations of subcategories. Moreover, they may consider politicians of their own party who become involved in a scandal to be atypical. If so, these atypical exemplars may not be included in the temporary representation of politicians of that party, thus eliminating the assimilation effect observed in the present study. In fact, we would predict a contrast effect on the general evaluation of the party under the latter condition.

Another possibility is that a preexisting hostile attitude toward one of the specific exemplars may induce respondents to include this exemplar in the category of scandal politicians, thus eliminating the contrast effect

observed in the present study. Moreover, a specific exemplar may share a sufficient number of salient features with scandal politicians to trigger inclusion of the exemplar in that category ("This is another crook"). If so, an assimilation rather than a contrast effect may emerge at the exemplar level. Although the latter possibility seems plausible, our data provide no support for it. One of the three exemplars used in the present study had been involved in at least two well-known scandals, but the impact of the prime on the evaluation of this exemplar did not differ from its impact on the evaluation of exemplars who had not been involved in scandals. This lack of difference, however, may reflect that the scandals in which this particular exemplar had been involved were less severe than the scandal used as a prime.

In addition, it is worth noting that the three politicians used as specific exemplars were well known. On theoretical grounds, we would expect that evaluations of unknown politicians would show an assimilation rather than a contrast effect. This follows from the assumption that subjects would need to derive their evaluation of unknown exemplars from their representation of the superordinate general category "politicians" (see Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). If so, inclusion of the primed information in the representation of politicians in general should result in assimilation effects on derived evaluations of specific exemplars, much as suggested by the carryover effects observed on subjects' second judgments in the present study. Although much remains to be learned about the numerous variables that may mediate the impact of a scandal, we note that the operation of these variables can be conceptualized within the framework of the general inclusion/exclusion model offered here.

According to that model, the impact of information that comes to mind depends on how it is categorized. If it is included in the temporary representation formed of the target category, it will result in assimilation effects on subsequent evaluations of the target. If it is excluded from that representation, it may be used in constructing a standard of comparison, resulting in contrast effects. The latter will occur, however, only if the excluded information is linked to the underlying dimension of judgment. As Schwarz, Munkel, and Hippler (1990) observed, it is not sufficient that information with extreme implications come to mind at the time of judgment. Rather, this information must be thought about with regard to the dimension along which a judgment is required. This was the case in the present study, where the priming question explicitly referred to a scandal, thus tapping the dimension of trustworthiness. Had we asked respondents to estimate Uwe Barschel's birthdate, for example, thus making him accessible in memory without priming the scandal in which he was involved, the observed

contrast effect would most likely not have been obtained (see Schwarz & Bless, in press, for a more detailed discussion).

In conclusion, the present findings did provide consistent support for the inclusion/exclusion model of assimilation and contrast effects (Schwarz & Bless, in press). This model holds that any variable that influences the categorization of what comes to mind determines the direction of its impact. Hence, next time your peers misbehave, make sure you trigger the proper categorizations, so you may benefit rather than suffer from their acts.

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