

QSS Honors Program Experience 2020-2021

[Madeleine Sach](#)

“The Effect of Cues from Groups with Issue Relevance on American Public Opinion”

What I Did

My QSS thesis focused on the divergence in opinion between the members of a group implicated by a particular policy or practice that engages the group and the broader public. For example, consider the practice of using “Latinx” to describe Hispanic Americans. Despite the widespread use of this term by colleges, corporations, and other organizations, just four percent of Hispanic Americans like it. Here there is a divergence between Hispanic Americans (a group engaged by the practice of using “Latinx”) and Americans at large.

I was curious as to whether elevating the preferences of “at-stake groups” is influential. Accordingly, I conducted a survey experiment of N = 4,625 individuals who are demographically representative of the United States that compares the influence of cues from peers (i.e., “People who answered the previous questions on the survey like you”) to cues from groups primarily implicated by a policy or practice. I considered the influence of four at-stake groups and associated policies and practices: farmers and agricultural subsidies; members of the military and defense spending; Black Americans and federally funded reparations; and, Hispanic Americans and the term “Latinx.” My experiment exposed respondents to cues from at-stake group members and from members of the public “like them” and sought to determine which cues were the most influential.

What I Learned

Overall, I contributed to the growing literature that cues from peers are important. I found strong evidence of both at-stake cues and peer cues. For example, my survey experiment showed that respondents updated their beliefs about using the term “Latinx” to describe the Hispanic population after receiving information about the preferences of Hispanic Americans or their own peers. Interestingly, I found that the effect of at-stake cues exceeds the effect of peer cues in the opposite direction, suggesting that shared identity is not a prerequisite for persuasion. I also found evidence that the effect of the cues is moderated by respondent partisanship, the stakes of the policy, and the valence of the cue.

Ultimately, my research provides evidence that at-stake groups can have a powerful influence on public opinion. This has positive implications for democracy: Americans take into account the opinions of a group that are implicated by a policy. Further, given the recent focus on issues with at-stake groups -- from Black Lives Matter to vaccine distribution -- it is increasingly important to understand how to frame policy debates. I demonstrate that social cues can help to close divergences in opinions between at-stake groups and the broader public. Respondents recognize the value in the preferences of at-stake groups and update their opinions in that direction.

Why I Did It

There are several reasons why I chose to write a thesis. First, I loved working on research at Dartmouth, and I wanted a chance to see if academia was for me. During my time at Dartmouth, I was fortunate enough to work with three different professors on different political science research topics. These projects sparked an interest in completing my own research project in the form of the QSS thesis. Second, the thesis provided a unique opportunity to learn and grow during my senior year. By the time I reached my fourth year of Dartmouth, I felt very comfortable that I knew how to succeed in a college classroom. While I found the coursework interesting, I felt I wasn't growing as a student or individual as much as I had during my first three years at college. The thesis was a new opportunity to tackle an entirely new set of skills. During the year spent working on my project, I deepened relationships with my professors and grew as a scholar and a person. I honed hard skills like data analysis and implementing surveys in Qualtrics, but I also grew immensely in my soft skills, like problem solving, asking for help, and thinking creatively. Lastly, I pursued the QSS thesis because it is a true culminating experience. In QSS, we take many courses: data visualization, statistics, modeling, and upper-level social science courses. The thesis is the first (and last) opportunity to independently pull all these threads together. Applying my understanding of data to political science helped to cement course concepts and deepen my understanding of these topics.

Advice for Future Thesis Students

Should you choose to write a thesis, your experience will undoubtedly be different than my own. Still, I hope that this advice is general enough that it helps you. If you have any more targeted questions, feel free to email me: maddiesach99@gmail.com.

- **Recognize where your own expertise is when picking a project:** The thesis is a lot to accomplish in three short terms. When choosing a project, I found it helpful to think about where I already have subject knowledge or methodological experience. In my case, I chose to extend work that I completed on a former research project, cutting down the amount of time necessary for the literature review phase. I also chose to pursue a survey experiment because I had experience with this methodological tool. Working in an area I had researched before with familiar tools really helped make a large undertaking seem manageable.
- **Stay ahead of deadlines:** The thesis is a lot of work, and each deadline has the ability to creep up on you. This is especially true if you want to receive feedback from your advisor before turning your work in to the QSS Thesis Coordinator. I tried to aim to have a first cut of my work done around a week and a half before each deadline, so I could first show it to my faculty advisor and implement her feedback before turning it in. Remember, everything takes a bit longer than you think it will!
- **At the same time, each project has different needs:** I worked closely with the QSS Thesis Coordinator to come up with a timeline that worked for the needs of my project. Pre-testing my experiment was really important to me, and collecting that data, analyzing the results, and then pivoting my hypotheses/experimental design based on those results took a lot of time! As a result, I was behind the formal deadlines during the beginning of the spring term. All of these deadlines are to help you stay on track with your project, if

you feel your work needs more time at a specific stage, coordinate with the professor running the program to see if that is feasible.

- **Remember the bigger picture:** It is very easy to get bogged down in the specific details of your thesis. This is something I struggled with especially during the experimental design phase. As you build out your project, there will be hundreds of tasks you could spend more time perfecting. Don't lose sight of the bigger picture! There will always be a better measure for your dependent variable, a more concise way to frame your hypotheses, or better issues areas to study. Each of these choices are trade-offs: you will need to make compromises because you can't achieve everything at once. Make choices you can justify and then move on with the bigger picture in mind.