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# How Do We Want Others to Decide? Geographical Distance Influences Evaluations of Decision Makers

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## Abstract

People who decide on behalf of others can be located at various geographical distances from their clients and constituents. Across five experiments, we examined the role distance plays in evaluations of these decision makers. Specifically, drawing on construal level theory, we examined how the type of information (aggregate or case-specific) that closer and more distant decision makers cited as the basis for their decisions influenced how they were evaluated. We found that people expressed more anger toward (Experiment 1) and were less enthusiastic about (Experiments 2 and 4) more distant decision makers who relied on case-specific (vs. aggregate) information. In addition, we found that people were less enthusiastic about decision makers who relied on case-specific (vs. aggregate) information when evaluators were in a higher-level (vs. lower-level) construal mind-set (Experiments 3 and 5). Implications for how decision makers can manage impressions are discussed.

## Keywords

geographical distance, construal level, social judgment, decision making, base rates

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People often rely on others to make decisions on their behalf. For example, financial advisors invest their clients' money, doctors recommend treatment plans to patients, and public officials (e.g., policy makers, the police) create and uphold laws that affect the welfare of citizens. Several factors influence how such decision makers are evaluated, including their decision process (e.g., whether external sources are consulted, their extent of deliberation; Alicke & Weigold, 1990), the decision itself (i.e., whether evaluators agree with the decision; Alicke & Weigold, 1990), and the ultimate outcome of the decision (e.g., Alicke & Weigold, 1990; Baron & Hershey, 1988; Lipshitz & Barak, 1995). In the present research, we explore whether something as simple as the geographical distance between a decision maker and his or her constituents can influence how the decision maker is evaluated. For example, we will argue that constituents will tend to evaluate public officials differently when they are giving a speech in a local neighborhood versus in Washington, D.C. In what follows, we first review research on decision maker evaluations and then explore the way in which closer and more distant decision makers are differentially evaluated as a function of the type of evidence they rely on in their decision making. We specifically focus on political contexts, as public officials can reveal their policy decisions to constituents from various geographical locations.

## Evaluations of Decision Makers

A primary theme in the literature on evaluations of decision makers is that people show an outcome bias. Specifically, known outcomes (i.e., information about whether the decision ultimately led to a positive or negative outcome) are given more weight in evaluations than other information that might indicate whether a decision was sound (Baron & Hershey, 1988). However, people must often evaluate decision makers based on decisions that do not have immediately known outcomes. For example, constituents often vote on whether to reelect politicians before the consequences of their policy decisions have surfaced (e.g., Canes-Wrone, Herron, & Shotts, 2001). Given that many decisions have delayed outcomes, we focus on how people evaluate decision makers when the ultimate outcome of a decision is still unknown.

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Beyond agreement with the decision itself, an important factor that has been argued to enter into people's evaluations of decision makers is how the decision maker reached his or her decision. For example, the extent to which people find the process behind a decision fair (i.e., procedural justice; Greenberg & Folger, 1983; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Thibault & Walker, 1975) influences evaluations of a variety of decision makers, including supervisors (McFarlin & Sweeney, 1992), policy makers (See, 2009), and legal authorities (Tyler, 1984). Similarly, overall aspects of the decision process such as the extent to which the decision maker deliberated and/or consulted others can influence the degree to which the decision maker is seen positively (Alicke & Weigold, 1990).

Intriguingly, beyond these general questions of fair and thorough process, decisions may vary in terms of the type of information that a decision maker relied on when making a decision. For example, two broad categories of information that decision makers are often presented with are aggregate and case-specific information. Policy makers, for instance, can propose policies based on statistics (e.g., air-travel security reports) or salient events (e.g., an attempted terrorist attack), and so on. As a case in point, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) researchers recently analyzed crime trends in California and determined that there was no association between the location of medical marijuana dispensaries and crime rates. Yet, United States Attorney for the Northern District of California Melinda Haag shut down 10 medical marijuana dispensaries in 2011 based on single incidents of dispensary-related crime (Roberts, 2012). Do people prefer that their decision makers use one type of information instead of the other to reach their decision?

When people decide on their own behalf, research suggests that in instances where aggregate and case-specific information are both available, people tend to rely more on case-specific information (see Taylor & Thompson, 1982, for a brief review). Indeed, a large literature on the base-rate fallacy supports the position that people often underutilize aggregate information in favor of case-specific information (Bar-Hillel, 1980; Hamill, Wilson, & Nisbett, 1980; Kahneman & Tversky, 1973). People tend to rely on case-specific information at least partially because they are unable to adequately apply rules of statistical inference to their judgments (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). This tendency can also be affected by characteristics of the case-specific information, such as diagnosticity (Krupat, Smith, Leach, & Jackson, 1997), applicability (Ajzen, 1977), and vividness (Baesler & Burgoon, 1994).

Given that people prefer case-specific information in their personal decisions, are people likely to prefer that their decision makers rely on case-specific information when deciding on their behalf? We argue that the geographical distance of decision makers from their constituents influences what information constituents prefer that their decision makers rely on. We base this prediction on construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010), a framework that distinguishes

between two forms of representation: more abstract, higher-level construals that capture more central or important information (Henderson, 2011; Henderson & Trope, 2009; McCarthy & Skowronski, 2011, Waksalak, 2012) that applies across situations (Fiedler, Semin, Finkenauer, & Berkel, 1995; Libby & Eibach, 2002), and more concrete, lower-level construals that capture more vivid, imageable information (Strack, Schwarz, & Gschneidinger, 1985) that is more temporary, context-specific (Semin, Higgins, de Montes, Estourget, & Valencia, 2005), and superficial (Kay, 1971).

According to construal level theory, greater psychological distance from things (including geographical, temporal, and social distance) triggers higher-level construals (Trope & Liberman, 2010). For example, participants who watched a video that ostensibly depicted events at a geographically more distant (vs. closer) location used more abstract language to describe the video (Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2006). Work in this area has further suggested that these differences in abstraction have implications for judgments and decisions. Of strongest relevance to the current research, prior studies have shown that greater distance leads people to favor aggregate information rather than particular and individual cases. For example, Henderson, Fujita, Trope, and Liberman (2006) found that people were more likely to extrapolate from trends across 4 years (vs. a single-year deviation from the trend) when predicting geographically more distant (vs. closer) outcomes (see also Ledgerwood, Waksalak, & Wang, 2010). Presumably, this preference arises because aggregate pieces of information are by definition a reflection of events that have occurred across situations, and greater distance prompts higher-level construals and thereby more integrative, cross-situational thinking (Fiedler et al., 1995; Schul, 1983).

## The Present Research

Drawing on and extending this prior research, we predict that geographical distance from a decision maker will influence how people believe the decision maker should make his or her decisions. Specifically, we predict that people will prefer that more geographically distant decision makers rely more on aggregate (vs. case-specific) information when deciding on their behalf. That is, because more geographically distant decision makers are far away from the evaluator, the evaluator will consider their behavior from a higher-level perspective, and therefore be more inclined to approve of their decision making if it demonstrates a cross-situational, aggregate approach. Recent evidence suggests that people derive value from a match or "fit" between distance and construal (e.g., Fessel, 2011), and prefer distance-consistent arguments and appeals (e.g., Fujita, Eyal, Chaiken, Trope, & Liberman, 2008; Hansen & Wänke, 2010; Kim, Rao, & Lee, 2009). Therefore, more geographically distant decision makers should be evaluated more positively when they rely on abstract, rather than concrete, decision rules. Accordingly,

we predict that more distant decision makers who rely on case-specific information will be evaluated more negatively than their counterparts who rely on aggregate information in their decisions.

## Pilot

Before examining whether geographical distance from decision makers who rely on a particular source of information affects people's evaluations of them, we wanted to gather evidence that such geographical distance is likely to elicit higher-level, more abstract construals. Prior research has shown that increased geographical distance from objects and events fosters higher-level thinking (see, for example, Henderson & Wakslak, 2010, for a review). However, past research has not specifically shown that distance from a decision maker affects people's level of construal.

## Method

We recruited 102 participants (45 female;  $M_{age} = 33.19$ ,  $SD = 12.13$ ) via Amazon's Mechanical Turk. We excluded 3 participants for previous participation in a related study. We asked participants to complete a modified version of the Behavior Identification Form (BIF; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). For the original BIF, participants are presented with several behaviors and asked to indicate their preference between two alternative descriptions or action identifications for each behavior: a lower-level, more concrete action identification (description that emphasizes the means by which the action is performed) or a higher-level, more abstract action identification (description emphasizing the end for which the action is performed). We modified the BIF so that participants indicated how they thought about President Obama performing 16 behaviors. We chose behaviors that participants could easily envision a politician engaging in (see Table 1). We varied whether participants imagined Obama engaging in the behaviors in either the participant's city (closer) or Washington, D.C. (more distant).

**Measures.** For each of the 16 behaviors (e.g., Obama writing a list), we asked participants whether a more concrete, lower-level (e.g., writing things down) or a more abstract, higher-level statement (e.g., getting organized) best described that behavior. Responses for each behavior were scored so that preference for the lower- and higher-level description was 0 and 1, respectively. We created a summary score of preferences across all 16 items such that a total score of 0 indicated universal preference for lower-level descriptions and a score of 16 indicated universal preference for higher-level descriptions.

## Results and Discussion

An independent samples *t* test on the summary score revealed that participants had a stronger preference for the higher-level

descriptions when Obama was in Washington, D.C., ( $M = 11.06$ ,  $SD = 3.71$ ) versus in the participant's city ( $M = 9.60$ ,  $SD = 4.13$ ;  $t(97) = 2.25$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $d = 0.46$ ).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, we feel confident that increased geographical distance from a decision maker elicits higher-level, more abstract construals. Having established this effect on construal, we next explore our primary concern: whether geographical distance influences evaluations of decision makers who rely on particular sources of information.

## Experiment 1: Geographical Distance and Behavioral Responses to a Real-World Event

In the present experiment, we examined behavioral responses to a decision maker who was either relatively closer or more distant when making an ostensibly real decision on behalf of citizens. Specifically, we examined student responses to the city Police Chief announcing the reallocation of his police forces based on either crime statistics (aggregate information) or a shooting incident on the students' campus the previous day (case-specific information). Although the campus shooting was a real event, the Chief's announcement of the reallocation of police forces was fictitious. Nevertheless, we led participants to believe that the announcement was real. Participants were then given the opportunity to write anonymous feedback directly to the Chief. The written feedback served as our behavioral measure. During debriefing, we notified participants that the announcement was not real. We predicted that participants would express more negative emotion toward the Chief and would do more to ensure that their feedback was taken seriously if the Chief made the announcement from a more distant (vs. closer) location and relied on the shooting incident (vs. statistics) as the basis for his reallocation decision.

## Method

Eighty-three (56 female) University of Texas at Austin undergraduates completed a survey on campus that was ostensibly being conducted by the student newspaper. Participants read a purportedly real press release that indicated that the city Police Chief had given a press conference earlier that day to announce a reallocation of police forces in town, which would also result in changes to the police presence on campus. We manipulated three variables: geographical distance of the Chief, the information basis of his decision, and the decision itself. Some participants read that the Chief gave the press conference at the campus police headquarters, "only a few blocks away" (closer); the remaining participants read that the press conference was held at the Austin police headquarters, "several miles from campus" (more distant). In terms of information basis, some participants read that the Chief decided to reallocate police

**Table 1.** Preference for Higher-Level Action Identification of President Obama as a Function of Geographical Distance.

Behavior identification item	Closer ( <i>n</i> = 47)	More distant ( <i>n</i> = 52)
Obama paying attention to his family Spending time with his children versus loving them	25.5	44.2
Obama making a list Writing things down versus getting organized	66.0	71.2
Obama reading an article Following words on a screen versus gaining knowledge	76.6	90.4
Obama spending time with voters Having beer or coffee with them versus being available	53.2	67.3
Obama volunteering in a soup kitchen Giving food to homeless versus helping others	70.2	75.0
Obama showing up for an appointment Meeting someone to discuss a particular issue versus being responsible	34.0	40.4
Obama wearing clothes Putting on a suit and tie versus appearing respectable	66.0	78.8
Obama comforting someone Hugging someone versus showing compassion	76.6	84.6
Obama attending to his sick children Giving them medicine versus maintaining their health	66.0	67.3
Obama letting his staff get off work early Assigning less work versus being a nice guy	78.7	84.6
Obama playing basketball Shooting the ball versus exercising	44.7	61.5
Obama making truthful statements to a colleague Using correct statistics versus demonstrating his intelligence	42.6	69.2
Obama noticing someone Saying "hello" versus showing friendliness	55.3	67.3
Obama compromising Saying "yes" versus being practical	83.0	90.4
Obama teaching a child something Using simple words versus sharing wisdom	74.5	82.7
Obama sharing information with voters Answering questions versus being open	46.8	55.8

Note: Numbers indicate the percentage of participants in each condition who preferred the higher-level action identification over the lower-level action identification (pilot study).

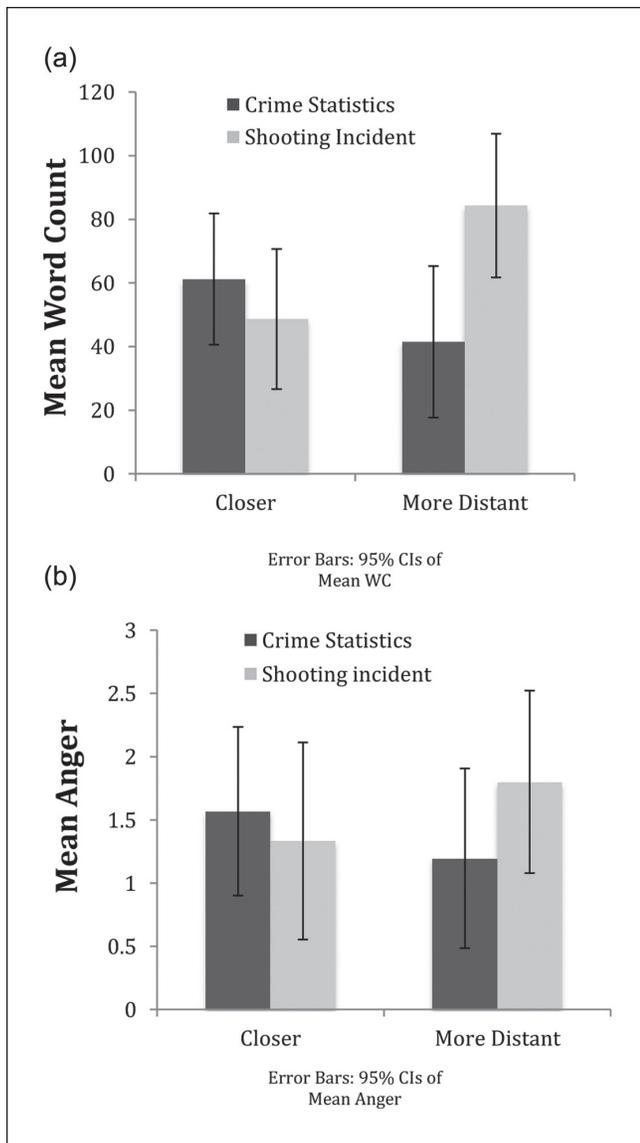
forces based on crime statistics released that morning; the remaining participants read that the decision was based on the campus shooting the previous day. To ensure that our demonstrated effects were not dependent on the type of decision made by the Chief, some participants read that the Chief decided to increase the police presence on campus, thereby decreasing the police presence in the rest of town; the remaining participants read that the Chief decided to decrease the police presence on campus, thereby increasing the police presence in the rest of town.

**Measures.** We asked participants to write one to two paragraphs providing anonymous feedback to the Chief about his reallocation decision, keeping in mind that the more they wrote, the more likely the Chief would take their opinion seriously. Participants' written responses were analyzed for overall word count and their expression of specific emotions

toward the Chief. That is, in addition to calculating the word count of participants' responses, we had two independent judges blind to condition code written responses for expression of anger and sadness toward the Chief (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extreme anger/sadness*;  $r = .68$  and  $.74$ , respectively). We coded for anger and sadness to determine whether our experimental manipulations affected specific emotions or negative emotion more generally.

### Results and Discussion

A 2 (Distance: closer vs. more distant)  $\times$  2 (Information Basis: statistics vs. shooting)  $\times$  2 (Decision: increase vs. decrease police forces on campus) ANOVA on average word count revealed a Distance  $\times$  Information Basis interaction,  $F(1, 79) = 6.1, p < .05$ . When the Chief was closer, the length of participants' responses did not differ based on the Chief



**Figure 1.** Mean word count (a) and expression of anger (b) in written responses to the Police Chief as a function of geographical distance of the Chief from participants and the information cited as the basis for his police reallocation decision. Note: CI = confidence interval. Expression of anger ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much* (Experiment 1).

relying on the crime statistics ( $M = 61.21$ ,  $SD = 52.64$ ) versus the shooting ( $M = 48.67$ ,  $SD = 30.66$ ,  $t(43) = 0.96$ ,  $p = .343$ ,  $d = 0.29$ ; Figure 1); however, participants wrote significantly more when the Chief was more distant and relied on the shooting incident ( $M = 84.30$ ,  $SD = 73.39$ ) versus the statistics ( $M = 41.50$ ,  $SD = 33.18$ ) for his reallocation decision,  $t(36) = 2.72$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = 0.90$ . No main effects or other interaction effects emerged (all  $F$ s  $< 1$ ) on word count. Given that participants were told to write more to ensure that their feedback was taken seriously, a higher word count implied that when people's expectations were not met (i.e., a more distant

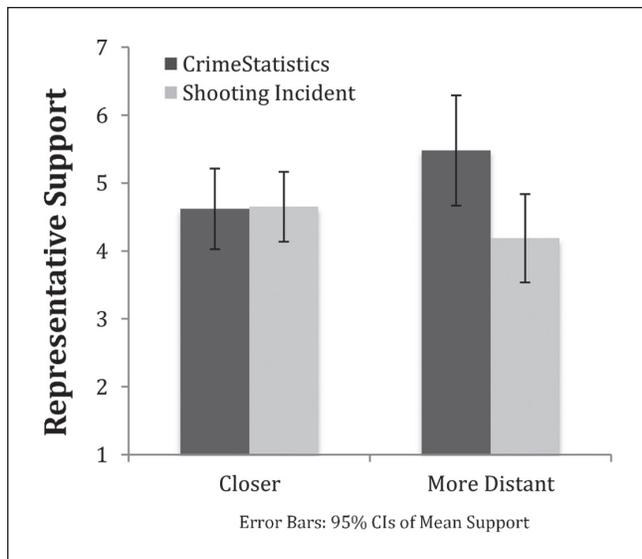
decision maker relied on the “wrong” info), they went to greater lengths to ensure that their voice was heard.

Coding for anger and sadness expressed toward the Chief revealed a Distance  $\times$  Information Basis interaction on the expression of anger,  $F(1, 79) = 2.82$ ,  $p < .05$  (Figure 1). When the Chief made his press conference in a more distant location, participants expressed more anger toward him when he relied on case-specific ( $M = 1.8$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) rather than aggregate information ( $M = 1.22$ ,  $SD = 0.39$ ,  $t(36) = -2.16$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = 0.72$ ). In contrast, when the Chief made his press conference in a closer location, participants did not differentially express anger toward him when he cited case-specific ( $M = 1.36$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ) rather than aggregate information ( $M = 1.52$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ,  $t(43) = 0.67$ ,  $p = .51$ ,  $d = 0.20$ ). We conducted a follow-up analysis to ensure our effects were independent of word count. The Distance  $\times$  Information Basis interaction remained significant when word count was entered as a covariate,  $F(1, 79) = 3.92$ ,  $p = .05$ . There were no differences between conditions on expression of sadness (all  $F$ s  $< 1$ ).

In summary, when participants provided feedback to a Police Chief in response to a real-world event, their language varied based on their distance from the Chief and the information cited as the basis for the Chief's decision. Specifically, participants wrote more—presumably, per our instructions, to ensure the Chief took their feedback seriously—and expressed more anger when the Chief was more geographically distant and relied on the recent shooting. These data lend behavioral support to our hypothesis that people differentially evaluate closer and more distant decision makers according to the information relied on as the basis for a decision. As noted earlier, prior research has shown that greater psychological distance from an event increases the relative weight given to aggregate information during decision making (Henderson et al., 2006; Ledgerwood et al., 2010). Our findings nicely compliment this past work. Using a real-world event, we held the psychological distance of the event itself constant, and showed that the geographical distance of the *decision maker* led people to provide more feedback and express more anger over distant-incongruent decisions (i.e., decisions by a more distant decision maker based on case-specific, rather than aggregate, information).

## Experiment 2: Geographical Distance and Support for U.S. Representatives

One potential limitation to Experiment 1 was that the case-specific information was confounded with the distance of the decision maker. That is, the shooting incident occurred in the same location where the closer Chief made his reallocation announcement. Experiment 2 was designed to remove this confound and conceptually replicate the results of the previous experiment using another real-world situation. Specifically, Experiment 2 examined support for U.S.



**Figure 2.** Participant support for the representative who favored a ban on high-capacity ammunition as a function of geographical distance of the representative from participants and the information cited as the basis of the policy stance. Note: Scales ranged from 1 to 7 (Experiment 2).

Representatives after an announcement of a policy decision. We focused on a policy change that was considered in the wake of the shooting of U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson, Arizona—a bill that would ban the purchase of gun magazines that allow rapid firing of high amounts of ammunition. We predicted that participants would show less support for a more distant (vs. closer) representative who relied on case-specific rather than aggregate information when formulating a policy decision.

## Method

Two weeks after the Arizona shooting, we recruited 112 participants in the United States (68 female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 31.60$ ,  $SD = 11.17$ ) via Mechanical Turk to participate in a survey purportedly conducted by Gallup. After identifying the location of participants' residence, we told them that Gallup had interviewed U.S. Representatives, including their representative, about gun laws in light of recent crime statistics; statistics were taken from real data (Violence Policy Center, 2011). At the time of conducting the experiment, participants were also aware that the Arizona shooting had occurred. We varied the purported location of the interview with the representative. That is, participants read that the interview either occurred at the representative's district office (closer) or the representative's Washington, D.C., office (more distant). Participants in the more distant (closer) condition read,

We recently interviewed your representative in the Congressional offices in Washington, DC (at your local Congressional office in your district). The interview in Washington, DC (your local

district) centered on your representative's stance on a proposed gun control law banning high-capacity ammunition clips from firearms. Violence Policy Center statistics indicate that dating back to 1989, 135 people died and 156 were wounded in 10 mass murder incidents involving high capacity ammunition clips.

Next, participants read a quote in which their representative expressed support for a ban—Participants in the *aggregate condition* read that their representative supported a ban based on the aforementioned statistics, whereas participants in the *case-specific information condition* read that their representative supported the ban based on the Arizona shooting:

As the statistics indicate (As the recent shooting in Tucson, AZ demonstrates), high capacity clips quickly injure and kill high numbers in violent incidents. Further, if citizens decide to act in defense during an incident, high capacity clips could further increase the number of people killed or wounded by way of accidental friendly fire. Thus, my position is that we need to ban high-capacity ammunition clips from being purchased. I will vote in line with my position on the proposed new bill should it come to vote in the House of Representatives.

**Measures.** We asked participants “How likely are you to support your representative in the next election?” (1 = *not at all likely* to 7 = *very likely*) and “How likely are you to vote to reelect your representative in the next election?” (1 = *not at all likely* to 7 = *very likely*). We created a behavioral intention composite by averaging responses ( $\alpha = .98$ ). We also created a composite manipulation-check score based on two questions about how geographically close participants were to the location of the representative's interview (“Geographically, how far away are you from where your representative gave us an interview?” and “How much geographical space separates you from where your representative gave us an interview?” 1 = *very close* to 7 = *very far*;  $\alpha = .98$ ). To verify that distance from the shooting in Arizona did not affect our results, we calculated the number of miles between participants' location and Tucson, Arizona, using participants' IP addresses to pinpoint participants' location when they completed the survey.

## Results and Discussion

An independent samples *t* test on the distance composite score verified that participants perceived the representative who was purportedly interviewed in Washington, D.C., as geographically farther away ( $M = 5.2$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ) than the representative who was purportedly interviewed in his or her district ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ;  $t(106) = 5.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.98$ ). A 2 (Distance: closer vs. more distant)  $\times$  2 (Information Basis: statistics vs. shooting) between-participants ANOVA revealed a marginal main effect of information basis,  $F(1, 107) = 2.28$ ,  $p = .10$ , that was qualified by a significant Distance  $\times$  Information Basis interaction,  $F(1, 107) = 4.17$ ,

$p < .05$  (Figure 2). Participants in the more distant condition expressed less support for a representative whose decision was based on the shooting ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ) rather than the statistics ( $M = 5.28$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ,  $t(39) = 2.35$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = 0.82$ ). However, participants' support in the closer condition was not affected by whether the representative's decision was based on the shooting ( $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 2.04$ ) or the statistics ( $M = 4.40$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ,  $t(68) = 0.32$ ,  $p = .75$ ,  $d = 0.08$ ). Follow-up analyses revealed that participants' distance from Tucson did not influence the results (all  $F$ s  $< 1$ ).

Experiment 2 demonstrated the effect of geographical distance on evaluations of decision makers using another real-world event. Participants more negatively evaluated a more distant representative who relied on the shooting to formulate a stance on the high-capacity ammunition ban. Based on a Gallup Poll that indicated that most Americans were in favor of the ban at the time of the experiment (Omero, 2011), we concluded that most participants agreed with the representative's decision. Therefore, distance and the information basis of the decision, and not the decision itself, were responsible for differences in participants' evaluations of the representative.

### Experiment 3: Construal Level and Support for a Decision Maker

According to construal level theory, increased geographical distance cues people to view objects, events, and people more abstractly (Trope & Liberman, 2010). We posited that this process of mentally representing information in terms of abstract summaries that apply across situations (vs. specific details) is the mechanism by which greater geographical distance leads people to be less enthusiastic about decision makers who rely on case-specific information when deciding on their behalf. Experiment 3 examined this hypothesized mechanism by directly manipulating level of construal. In addition, we extended beyond Experiments 1 and 2 by examining another form of aggregate versus case-specific information: consensus and dissenting opinion.

#### Method

We recruited 205 participants (126 female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 26.46$ ,  $SD = 11.34$ ) via email lists and Internet forums to fill out a survey on decision making in exchange for entry into a lottery for US\$50 in cash. We excluded 9 participants for not following instructions ( $n = 8$  or 3.9%) or for suspicion of the true purpose of the study ( $n = 1$  or 0.5%). Participants were asked to imagine attending a community forum to deliver feedback to the School District Superintendent about a proposed healthier school lunch program. We manipulated construal level using a How/Why task (Freitas, Gollwitzer, & Trope, 2004). Specifically, we asked participants to provide feedback to the Superintendent on a school issue of their choice (e.g., teacher retention). After generating an issue,

participants in the lower-level construal condition were asked to provide progressively more specific ways *how* the superintendent could address the issue (e.g., raise teacher salaries). Participants in the higher-level construal condition were asked to provide progressively more abstract reasons *why* the superintendent should address the issue (e.g., to improve student learning). Thinking about why (vs. how) an action is carried fosters thinking at a more general, superordinate level (Strack et al., 1985; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987, 1989), which carries over to subsequent judgments (Freitas et al., 2004).

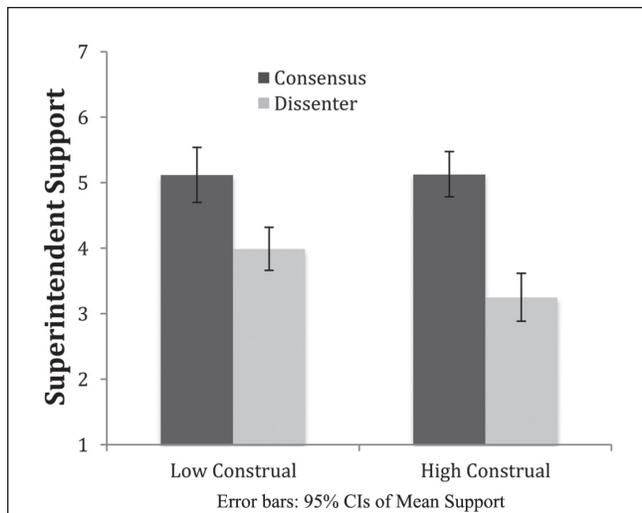
After completing the construal manipulation, participants read that the Superintendent collected anonymous feedback about the proposed school lunch program. Some participants read that 85% of community forum attendees (aggregate) supported the new program, but one parent left an impassioned voicemail (case-specific) expressing strong opposition to the program; the remaining participants read that 85% of forum attendees opposed the program, but one parent left an impassioned voicemail expressing strong support for the program. The Superintendent cited either the consensus or the dissenting opinion as the basis for deciding to implement the new lunch program.

**Measures.** We asked participants "Do you support the decision made by the Superintendent?" (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*), "What is your overall impression of the Superintendent?" (1 = *very negative* to 7 = *very positive*), and "Do you agree with the Superintendent's decision?" (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*). We created an endorsement composite by averaging responses ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

#### Results and Discussion

A 2 (Construal Level: high vs. low)  $\times$  2 (Information Basis: consensus vs. dissenter) between-participants ANOVA revealed main effects of construal level,  $F(1, 192) = 3.81$ ,  $p = .05$ , and information basis,  $F(1, 192) = 64.86$ ,  $p < .001$ , that were qualified by a Construal  $\times$  Information Basis interaction,  $F(1, 192) = 3.95$ ,  $p < .05$  (see Figure 3).<sup>2</sup> Participants in the lower-level construal condition expressed less support for the Superintendent who relied on the dissenting opinion ( $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ) rather than the consensus ( $M = 5.42$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ;  $t(86.58) = 3.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.73$ ). Participants in the higher-level construal condition also expressed less support for the Superintendent who relied on the dissenting opinion ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ) rather than the consensus ( $M = 5.44$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ); however, this effect was twice as large in the higher-level construal condition,  $t(82.98) = 7.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.57$ . Indeed, when the Superintendent relied on the dissenting opinion, participants in the higher-level construal condition offered less support than participants in the lower-level construal condition,  $t(99) = 2.55$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = 0.51$ .

Results from Experiment 3 support construal level as the mechanism by which geographical distance influences



**Figure 3.** Participant support for the School Superintendent as a function of construal level and the information cited as the basis for his decision to implement a healthier school lunch program. Note: Scales ranged from 1 to 7 (Experiment 3).

evaluations of decision makers who rely on aggregate versus case-specific information in their decisions. Participants induced into a higher-level construal more negatively evaluated a Superintendent who relied on dissenting opinion in deciding to implement a healthier school lunch program.

#### Experiment 4: Geographical Distance and a Decision Maker's Overall Decision Style

Experiments 1 to 3 focused on evaluations of a decision maker after a single decision. Although there are many contexts in which it is appropriate to evaluate a decision maker after one decision, there are also contexts in which it may be appropriate to evaluate a decision maker's overall decision style. Consider, for example, that policy makers make decisions on a variety of political issues (e.g., health care, taxes) that affect constituents. Or consider that corporate leaders continually make decisions that affect their employees (e.g., salaries increases, vacation policies). Although it is possible that participants' evaluations in Experiments 1 and 2 were based on an assumption that the information used was indicative of the decision maker's overall style, these experiments only provide evidence of an effect of geographical distance on single decisions. We designed Experiment 4 to examine whether our findings extend to evaluations of a decision maker's overall style.

#### Method

Seventy-seven participants in the United States (27 female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 35.95$ ,  $SD = 14.89$ ) completed the experiment on

Mechanical Turk. Three participants were excluded from the final analyses for suspicion of the true purpose of the experiment. Participants were asked to imagine that a presidential race was down to two candidates. Next, participants were asked to imagine that they did not know either of the candidate's political views and therefore watched a debate between the two candidates to inform their vote.

We told participants that the debate took place either "in your town, 5 miles from where you live" (closer) or "in another state, approximately 2,000 miles from where you live" (more distant). Participants then read about eight political issues (presented sequentially) that the candidates debated (homeland security, the national debt, standardized testing, immigration, gun control, global warming, abstinence-only education, and federal welfare). To ensure that evaluations were based on the candidates' decision style and not on specific political views, we presented participants with the information that the candidates relied on for their stance for each political issue, but not their stance itself. That is, the information basis was worded so it did not indicate any particular stance. For example,

The candidates were asked about whether the U.S. should sign an international treaty to reduce carbon emissions.

Candidate A based his stance on a scientist's expert opinion about the effect of carbon emissions on the environment.

Candidate B based his stance on international trends in carbon emissions rates over the last 20 years.

Across each political issue, Candidate A always relied on some form of case-specific information (e.g., a single incident, individual testimonials), and Candidate B always relied on some form of aggregate information (e.g., statistics, consensus opinion).

**Measures.** After each individual issue was presented, participants responded to the question "Based on this issue which candidate do you like better?" Responses were scored so that preference for the candidate that relied on case-specific information and aggregate information was 0 and 1, respectively. We created a summary score of preferences across all eight issues such that a total score of 0 indicated universal preference for the candidate who relied on case-specific information and a score of 8 indicated universal preference for the candidate who relied on aggregate information. We created a composite manipulation-check score based on two questions about how geographically close participants were to the location of the debate ("According to the scenario, how geographically far from you did the presidential debate take place?" and "According to the scenario, how much geographical space separates you from where the presidential debate took place?" 1 = *very close* to 7 = *very far*;  $\alpha = .97$ ).

## Results and Discussion

An independent samples *t* test on the manipulation-check composite verified that participants perceived the debate as farther away when in another state versus in the participants' hometown ( $M = 6.43$ ,  $SD = 0.99$  vs.  $M = 2.74$ ,  $SD = 1.78$ ,  $t(39.32) = 10.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.57$ ).<sup>3</sup> Overall, participants in both conditions preferred the candidate who relied on aggregate information ( $M = 6.77$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ). An independent samples *t* test on the summary scores from the closer and more distant conditions revealed an effect of distance on overall preference for the two candidates,  $t(72) = 2.05$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = 0.49$ . Specifically, participants more strongly preferred the candidate who relied on aggregate (vs. the candidate who relied on case-specific) information when the debate was geographically more distant ( $M = 7.07$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) versus closer ( $M = 6.31$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ). These results indicate that geographical distance not only plays a role in evaluations of decision makers' single decisions but also influences preferences for decision makers' overall decision style.

## Experiment 5: Construal Level and a Decision Maker's Overall Decision Style

In this final experiment, we extended our construal level finding in Experiment 3 by examining how changes in construal level affect evaluations of a decision maker based on the decision maker's reliance on aggregate versus case-specific information across multiple decisions. Although the construal level manipulation that we used in Experiment 3 has been documented as valid manipulation (see, for example, Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006; Ledgerwood et al., 2010; Wakslak & Trope, 2009), a potential criticism of the manipulation is that participants in the higher-level and lower-level construal conditions were required to generate different content in their responses. We do not believe that this serves as a viable alternative explanation for our findings; however, to assuage any concerns, we created a new construal level manipulation in this experiment, which held the content constant for our experimental groups.

## Method

We recruited 189 participants in the United States (80 females;  $M_{\text{age}} = 35.23$ ,  $SD = 12.77$ ) via Mechanical Turk. Participants read the same scenario from Experiment 4, except that we made no mention of the geographical distance of the presidential debate. Prior to reading about the individual political issues, participants completed an ostensibly unrelated task that manipulated construal level. Previous research has demonstrated that priming participants to think more abstractly or concretely can have carryover effects to subsequent tasks (Freitas et al., 2004; Fujita, Trope, et al., 2006). One way to prime abstract or concrete thinking is to have people focus either on traits of a category or specific

examples of a category, respectively (Malkoc, Zauberan, & Bettman, 2010).

We created a task to induce abstract or concrete thinking by focusing participants on traits or specific examples of politicians.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, we presented participants with 10 word pairs that included a personality trait politicians might have (e.g., knowledgeable) and a specific example of a politician (e.g., John McCain). In the higher-level construal condition, participants were instructed to identify the trait in each pair (i.e., "Which of the following is a personality characteristic politicians might have?"); in the lower-level construal condition, participants were instructed to identify the example in each pair ("Which of the following is an example of a politician?"). We excluded participants from analyses for suspicion of the true purpose of the experiment ( $n = 9$  or 5%) or for not following instructions ( $n = 19$  or 10%).

## Results and Discussion

As in the previous experiment, participants generally preferred the candidate who relied on aggregate information,  $M = 6.34$ ,  $SD = 1.86$  (1 = universal preference for the candidate who relied on case-specific information; 8 = universal preference for the candidate who relied on aggregate information). However, as expected, an independent samples *t* test on the summary scores of the higher- and lower-level construal conditions revealed an effect of construal level on participants' overall preferences for the candidates,  $t(159) = 2.172$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = 0.34$ .<sup>5</sup> Specifically, participants more strongly preferred the candidate who relied on aggregate information in the higher-level ( $M = 6.70$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ) versus lower-level construal condition ( $M = 6.01$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ). These results support our contention that differences in construal level underlie the influence of geographical distance on differences in evaluations of decision makers. From a construal level theory perspective, geographical distance influences the way information is represented. Consistent with this perspective, directly manipulating construal level replicated the results obtained in Experiment 4 that varied geographical distance from decision makers.

## General Discussion

Our findings suggest that geographical distance influences evaluations of people who make decisions on behalf of others. Specifically, we demonstrated that geographical distance influences how the information basis of others' decisions factors into people's evaluations of them. Consistent with our predictions, Experiments 1 and 2 showed that more distant (ostensibly real-world) decision makers were evaluated more negatively when they cited case-specific, rather than aggregate, information as the basis for their decisions. Experiment 4 demonstrated that people more strongly preferred a more distant decision maker who consistently relied on aggregate information across multiple decisions (vs. a

decision maker who consistently relied on case-specific information). Finally, Experiments 3 and 5 supported our construal level account of the effect of distance on evaluations of decision makers, as we found participants who adopted a higher-level (vs. lower-level) construal more strongly preferred the decision maker who relied on aggregate (vs. case-specific) information.

### Alternative Explanations

Although we argue that greater geographical distance and concomitant more abstract construals increase attention to cross-situational information, an alternative interpretation of our findings might be that geographical distance instead decreased the perceived relevance of the case-specific information. One reason people might prefer case-specific information in personal decisions is that case-specific information is more emotionally arousing than aggregate information (Taylor & Thompson, 1982). Much research has been grounded in the notion that increased geographical distance from things reduces the relevance or emotional impact of those things (Davis, Gross, & Ochsner, 2011; Latané, Liu, Nowak, Bonevento, & Zheng, 1995; Mobbs et al., 2007; Mühlberger, Neumann, Wieser, & Pauli, 2008; Williams & Bargh, 2008). Consequently, one could argue that our manipulation of geographical distance reduced the intensity of emotions typically evoked by case-specific information. As a result, people may have devalued the case-specific information and therefore preferred decision makers who relied on aggregate information.

We believe, however, that this interpretation is unlikely to explain our results. First, not all case-specific information is emotionally arousing (see Taylor & Thompson, 1982, for a similar argument). Indeed, we cannot think of an emotion that would be aroused by a recent deviation in a trend or an expert's scientific opinion (Experiments 4 and 5). Second, most of the literature suggests that reduced emotional intensity results from increased geographical distance from the emotion-inducing event itself (see, for example, Mühlberger et al., 2008). Thus, distance from the case-specific information (e.g., a salient event) would reduce its importance in decisions. However, our distance manipulations in Experiments 2 and 4 involved distance from the decision maker, not the case-specific information. Moreover, in Experiment 2, we found no effects of distance from the shooting (i.e., the case-specific information) on evaluations of the representative; it is difficult to argue that the distance from the representative altered the emotional intensity created by geographical closeness to the incident. Finally, to our knowledge, there is no empirical evidence that priming construal level alters emotional intensity; however, Experiments 3 and 5 indicate that construal level affects people's preference for what information they believe decision makers should rely on. Therefore, we believe that the most parsimonious explanation for our findings is that geographical

distance cued more abstract construals, which fostered an increased preference for decision makers to rely on aggregate information in their decisions.

### Theoretical Implications

Previous research indicates that psychological distance increases the preference for aggregate (vs. case-specific) information in personal decisions (Henderson et al., 2006; Ledgerwood et al., 2010). From a construal level theory perspective, this preference presumably arises because increased distance triggers more abstract construals, which increases the weight people give to information that exists across situations (i.e., aggregate information). Because decision makers often consider aggregate and case-specific information when deciding on behalf of others, we explored whether people's preference for information arises when evaluating the decisions of near and distant others. Unlike the previous research, we focused on the geographical distance of a decision maker, not the decision itself. Although the distance between an evaluator and decision maker can be completely unrelated to the distance of the actual decision, our findings show a similar pattern to the research on near and distant personal decisions. Our results imply that interpersonal distance is enough to trigger changes in evaluation as a function of information basis of a decision.

Importantly, interpersonal distance may help explain a specific aspect of our current findings, namely, that we did not observe a preference reversal in our close conditions. Whereas previous research has shown that people prefer case-specific information over aggregate information in psychologically closer *personal* decisions (Ledgerwood et al., 2010), on the whole, we found that people did not have a clear preference for closer decision makers to rely on aggregate or case-specific information. It is possible that increased psychological closeness fosters an increased preference for case-specific information, but that preference is reduced when evaluating another person's decision. In other words, evaluating another person's decision may feel relatively more psychologically distant than a personal decision, which in turn may increase people's attention to the aggregate information. For example, we would expect people to be more swayed by a personal testimonial (which is case-specific) in their own voting decision but prefer that a policy maker rely on data trends or statistics (which is aggregate) for the same voting decision, especially when the policy maker is geographically distant.

### Practical Implications

Our findings have several practical implications for decision makers. Generally, decision makers should be aware that their constituents evaluate them not only for the decisions themselves but also for the process behind those decisions. In other words, a good decision in itself is not enough to

garner an extremely positive evaluation. Therefore, more distant decision makers should be aware that their constituents prefer them to rely on aggregate sources of information, even though case-specific information can often appear highly persuasive. Closer decision makers, however, should be aware that their constituents seem to want them to incorporate both aggregate and case-specific information. Consequently, closer decision makers who would rather completely avoid referencing case-specific information might improve their chances of a positive evaluation by either creating psychological distance between themselves and their constituents or by inducing their constituents to think more abstractly (e.g., using more abstract language during communication; Clark & Semin, 2008). Alternatively, knowing that evaluators are concerned about them relying on both case-specific and aggregate information, closer decision makers should be keen to frame their ultimate decision as taking into account both of these types of information.

## Coda

The present research implicates geographical distance as a factor that influences how the information basis of a decision influences evaluations of decision makers who make decisions on behalf of others. Specifically, the present findings imply that more distant decision makers would be wise to not only make a decision that people agree with but also base it on information their constituents deem most appropriate.

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## Notes

1. We excluded three participants for previous participation in a related study on geographical distance. When the excluded participants are included in the analysis, our results remain marginally significant,  $t(100) = 1.82, p = .07$ .
2. We excluded eight participants for not following the instructions of the construal task. Specifically, we excluded participants who completed the task by either filling in nonsense words or copying the example we provided word for word. We also excluded one participant for suspicion that the study was looking at the relationship between "abstractness and my opinion of the superintendent." Not surprisingly, when all excluded participants are included in the analysis, the critical interaction becomes nonsignificant,  $F(1, 201) = 1.90, p = .17$ .
3. We excluded three people for suspicion of the true purpose of the experiment. We determined suspicion based on any

mention of the relationship between distance, aggregate and case-specific information, and evaluations. When the excluded participants are included in the analysis, our results remain marginally significant,  $t(75) = 1.86, p = .07$ .

4. To ensure that our modified task shifted participants' level of construal, we recruited 199 participants in the United States (115 female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 33.98, SD = 12.83$ ) via Mechanical Turk. We excluded 12 participants who did not follow instructions. Participants first completed the construal manipulation and then completed a breadth of categorization task (Lieberman, Sagistrano, & Trope, 2002). Specifically, we asked participants to sort 38 household items (e.g., painting, telephone, refrigerator) into groups of items that belong together. We measured the number of groups created. Fewer groups indicate a higher level of construal. As expected, participants who viewed characteristics of politicians (higher-level construal) created fewer categories ( $M = 5.55, SD = 2.38$ ) than participants who viewed examples of politicians (lower-level construal;  $M = 6.33, SD = 2.78; t(185) = 2.08, p < .05, d = 0.30$ ).
5. We excluded 19 participants for not following the instructions of the construal task. Goodman, Cryder, and Cheema (2012) found that relative to student samples, participants completing experiments on Mechanical Turk are significantly less likely to pay attention to experimental materials, presumably because participants are not monitored by an experimenter when completing tasks online. We suspect that because our construal level manipulation simply involved clicking buttons (rather than writing texts as was required in Experiment 3), those participants who failed to follow instructions were simply not paying attention to the task and, thus, were excluded from the analysis. We also excluded 9 participants for suspicion of the true purpose of the study. We determined suspicion based on the mentioning of the relationship between the task and evaluations of the candidates or the preference for candidates who rely on aggregate versus case-specific information. Not surprisingly, when all excluded participants are included in the analysis, our results become nonsignificant,  $t(187) = 1.43, p = .16$ .

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