

# Delay, Doubt, and Decision: How Delaying a Choice Reduces the Appeal of (Descriptively) Normative Options

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Niels van de Ven<sup>1</sup>, Thomas Gilovich<sup>2</sup>, and Marcel Zeelenberg<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Tilburg University and <sup>2</sup>Cornell University

## Abstract

To help explain a regularity in democratic elections, we examined whether choosing to delay making a choice between a focal option and an alternative tends to make people subsequently less likely to choose what they would otherwise have chosen. The results of two experiments demonstrated that participants who were induced to delay making a decision were indeed less likely to choose the descriptively normative option. An additional experiment that primed a sense of doubt in participants provided support for a self-perception account of this result. Electing to delay making a choice is interpreted as an indication of doubt—doubt that tends to be attributed to the most prominent option. Delay-induced doubt about the normative option makes it less likely to be selected.

## Keywords

status quo, default, decision making, delayed choice, choice deferral

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Political junkies are familiar with a regularity in U.S. elections that is likely to seem odd to most psychologists. This regularity is known as the *incumbent rule*, and it refers to the fact that undecided voters who end up casting ballots tend to vote *against* the incumbent. One analysis found that in 127 of 155 national, state, and municipal elections, the majority of undecided voters went for the challenger (Panagakis, 1989). The incumbent rule can seem odd to a psychologist because of research findings that might lead one to expect the opposite result. That is, decision researchers have documented a status quo bias in people's choices—a bias to stick with the status quo option rather than try something new (Ritov & Baron, 1992; Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). The incumbent is by definition the status quo candidate, so why do undecided voters not favor the incumbent?

One possibility is that the status quo bias exerts itself before the eve of the election, and at that point the remaining undecided voters are people who cannot quite get themselves to favor the incumbent despite this bias. Undecided voters, in other words, may be mainly undecided about—that is, have reservations about—the incumbent (Panagakis, 1989). Thus, when the time comes for these voters to cast their ballots, the doubts they harbor about the incumbent exert themselves, resulting in a tendency to vote for the challenger.

We propose a variant of this explanation and examine its broader implications. We contend that undecided voters

interpret the fact that they have yet to decide as information that calls into question the wisdom of picking the incumbent. Given that the incumbent is typically the more psychologically prominent candidate, and that people know they often follow an “if it ain't broke, don't fix it” rule, they may wonder why they have not already resolved to vote for the incumbent (“If the incumbent is so great, why am I having reservations about my vote?”). In other words, we propose that the experience of doubt is experienced as doubt about the incumbent.

This reasoning implies that a similar effect should arise in arenas far beyond democratic elections. That is, the doubt that comes with the decision to delay making a choice should typically be attributed to the most psychologically prominent option, and thus reduce its appeal. Thus, focal or normative options of all sorts<sup>1</sup>—options that most people would otherwise favor if not for a delay—should prove less popular after people put off a decision. People typically prefer the status quo (Ritov & Baron, 1992; Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988) and default options (Johnson & Goldstein, 2003) over their

## Corresponding Author:

Thomas Gilovich, Cornell University, Psychology Department, Uris Hall,  
 Ithaca, NY 14853  
 E-mail: [tdg1@cornell.edu](mailto:tdg1@cornell.edu)

alternatives, and so this analysis leads to the prediction that after a delay, the appeal of the alternative option may be enhanced. A key element of our analysis is that the delay be self-chosen: An imposed delay cannot be taken as a sign of one's doubts about the incumbent and thus should not have the same effect (Bem, 1972).

We report three studies that examined our thesis. Experiments 1 and 2 examined whether people are less inclined to choose the normative option after electing to delay making a choice than after making the choice right away or after an imposed delay. Experiment 3 examined whether an induced sense of doubt tends to be attributed to the most prominent option and hence reduces its appeal.

## Experiment 1

In our first experiment, participants were asked to put themselves in the position of someone who had inherited money from a relative, with the stipulation that it had to be invested for 5 years before any of it could be spent. The relative's financial advisor recommended that the money be invested in the stock of a particular company, but mentioned another company as an alternative. The key question was whether, when asked to choose, participants would opt for the first (default) option or the alternative.<sup>2</sup> Half the participants were shown the daily stock prices of the two stocks for the previous 3 months and were asked to make their decision (*immediate-choice* condition). The other half were asked if they would like to wait and see the daily stock prices of the two companies over the next 3 months before making a decision; thus, they were tempted to delay their choice (*chosen-delay* condition). Participants in the two conditions received the same 3-month record of performance (which provided no basis for favoring one stock over the other) before making their choice. We predicted that participants in the chosen-delay condition would be less likely to choose the default option than those in the immediate-choice condition.

## Method

Sixty-seven Tilburg University students participated in this experiment as part of a series of studies for which they received €7. They read a scenario inviting them to imagine that an uncle had left them a substantial inheritance that they could not spend for 5 years. The family's financial advisor recommended that the money be invested in General Electric (or United Technologies) stock in the interim. The advisor also stipulated that if there were any objection to investing in General Electric (United Technologies), an alternative would be to invest in United Technologies (General Electric), whose stock had "performed on par" with the other stock "for the last several years." Which of these stocks was provided as the default option was counterbalanced, and had no influence on participants' choice,  $\chi^2(1, N = 67) = 1.96, p = .162$ .

Participants in the immediate-choice condition ( $n = 33$ ) were shown a graph depicting the performance of both stocks over the previous 3 months. The (hypothetical) performance of the two stocks during this period was very similar and offered no compelling basis for choosing one over the other. Participants were asked whether they would "take the financial advisor's recommendation" and invest in General Electric (United Technologies) or invest in United Technologies (General Electric).

Participants in the chosen-delay condition ( $n = 34$ ), who were not initially shown the stocks' 3-month performance, were asked whether they wanted to choose between the two stocks right then (without any performance information) or put off the decision until they completed other unrelated studies, after which they would receive information about the performance of the two stocks over the "next" 3 months. After spending roughly 15 min completing the unrelated experiments, participants who had put off their decision were shown the same graph of the two stocks' performance given to participants in the immediate-choice condition. (The 4 participants in the chosen-delay condition who elected not to delay their choice did not receive this information.)

After participants made their choice, they were asked to rate, on a 7-point scale, how much doubt they had had about which of the two options was best. We expected that in the immediate-choice condition, participants with the most doubt would be most likely to choose the default option. But we expected the opposite relationship between doubt and choice in the chosen-delay condition; that is, we expected that in this condition, participants with the most doubt would be most inclined to choose the alternative option.

## Results

Results for the immediate-choice condition were consistent with prior research (Ritov & Baron, 1992; Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988): The overwhelming majority (82%) of participants in this condition opted to invest in the stock that was listed as the default. As predicted, a significantly smaller percentage of participants (56%) in the chosen-delay condition chose the recommended option,  $\chi^2(1, N = 67) = 5.24, p = .022$ .

This comparison, although statistically significant, is a conservative test of our hypothesis. Four of the 34 participants in the chosen-delay condition did not delay their decision, and 3 of them chose the default. They were nonetheless included in the analysis to ensure that the significant between-condition difference could not be attributed to self-selection.

Participants in the two conditions did not differ in the amount of doubt they experienced (chosen-delay condition:  $M = 3.21, SD = 1.37$ ; immediate-choice condition:  $M = 3.30, SD = 1.70$ ),  $t(65) = 0.26, p = .797$ . But the connection between participants' level of doubt and the option they chose did vary with condition. Among participants in the immediate-choice condition, the more doubt they experienced, the more they

(marginally significantly) tended to choose the default option,  $\beta = 0.27, p = .125$ . However, among participants in the chosen-delay condition, the opposite pattern was observed: The more they were in doubt, the less likely they were to choose the default option,  $\beta = -0.39, p = .022$ . The difference between the two regression coefficients was significant,  $t(65) = 2.60, p = .012, d = 0.64$ .

## Discussion

These results indicate that a self-chosen delay in making a choice can influence the choice that is made, even if the delay does not result in the acquisition of additional information that favors one option over another. Participants who elected to delay their choice were less likely to choose the default option compared with participants who were asked to choose immediately. Choosing to delay making a choice appears to cast doubt disproportionately on the normative option, making it less appealing.

## Experiment 2

Experiment 2 was designed to examine the effect of a self-chosen delay on preferences for the normative option in a different domain, thereby testing the robustness of the effect observed in Experiment 1. Experiment 2 also included a forced-delay condition to test whether it is electing to delay a choice, not the delay itself, that lessens the appeal of the normative option.

## Method

Ninety-five psychology students at Tilburg University participated in this and several unrelated experiments in a single session. Participants read that two articles were under consideration for a reading assignment for the introductory social psychology course, which they were to take in a few months. One of the articles had been assigned the past few years (the status quo), and the other was new. Participants were asked to vote for the article they would like to be assigned. Some participants were asked to make their choice immediately, some were told they would cast their vote at the end of the session, and the remainder were given the option to decide immediately or wait until the end.

The articles (Gilbert & Ebert, 2002; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000) were both described as reports that people think they will be happier with one set of circumstances, but are actually happier with another (Gilbert & Ebert focused on changeable vs. unchangeable choices; Iyengar & Lepper focused on large vs. smaller choice sets).<sup>3</sup> The article presented as the status quo was counterbalanced and had no influence on the results. Some participants were asked to make their choice immediately (*immediate-choice* condition,  $n = 25$ ), and others were told to do so at the end of the session (*forced-delay* condition,  $n = 25$ ). The remaining participants (*chosen-delay* condition,  $n = 45$ ) were informed that they could call the experimenter (which might take some time if the experimenter was busy

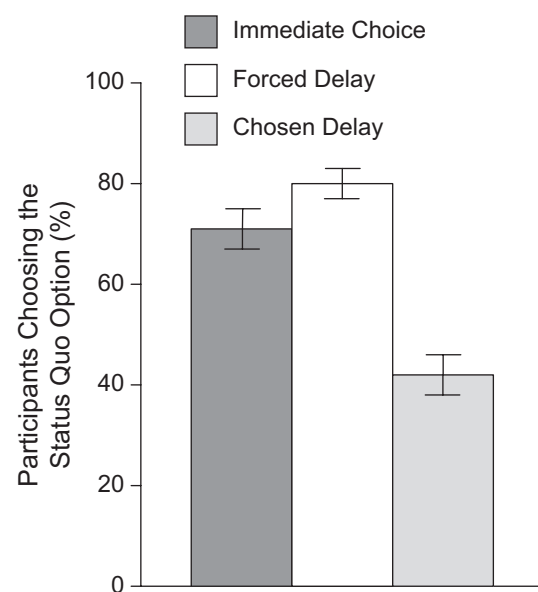
with other participants) and make their choice right away, or wait until the end of the experiment.

## Results and discussion

As Figure 1 shows, there was a pronounced difference between how likely participants in the chosen-delay condition and how likely participants in the other two conditions were to choose the status quo option. Most participants in the immediate-choice (72%) and forced-delay (80%) conditions chose the status quo, whereas only a minority (42%) of those in the chosen-delay condition did so. These latter participants chose the status quo significantly less often than those in the immediate-choice condition,  $\chi^2(1, N = 70) = 5.72, p = .017$ , and those in the forced-delay condition,  $\chi^2(1, N = 70) = 9.30, p = .002$ .<sup>4</sup>

We have offered something of a self-perception account of the tendency of people who delay making a choice to reject the normative option. According to this account, people who decline the opportunity to decide have observed a behavior they need to explain: their own failure to choose. The failure to make a choice is taken as a sign of doubt, and this doubt is attributed disproportionately to the most prominent alternative, which, in most cases, is the normative option. Failing to make a choice that could have been made calls into question all available options, but the normative option particularly strongly (Simmons & Nelson, 2006). Individuals are likely to reason, explicitly or implicitly, "Why don't I feel comfortable with this [the normative] option? I must have doubts about it."

To test this account in Experiment 3, we used a priming procedure to activate a sense of doubt in participants. We predicted that this incidental feeling of doubt would tend to be attributed to the normative option. We also operationalized the normative



**Fig. 1.** Percentage of participants choosing the status quo option as a function of condition in Experiment 2. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

option differently than in Experiments 1 and 2 to examine whether our hypothesized effect applies beyond status quo and default options to normative options more generally. We expected participants in whom doubt had been primed to be less likely than those in a control condition to choose the normative option.

### Experiment 3

In our third experiment, we manipulated the relative salience of different options by making one option focal. Dhar and Simonson (1992) found that people prefer focal options over nonfocal options, but we expected no such preference among participants primed with doubt. We expected these participants to attribute their feeling of doubt mainly to the focal option and therefore to see it as less desirable.

### Method

One hundred twenty Tilburg University students participated in exchange for course credit. They first completed a scrambled-sentence task introduced as a study of language skills unrelated to the other tasks in the session. In the *neutral* condition, participants unscrambled 20 sets of words that did not revolve around a single theme. In the *doubt* condition, participants also unscrambled 20 word sets, but 10 of these sets were related to the theme of doubt. For example, the set “did know not to John what do” could be unscrambled to create “John did not know what to do.” Debriefing revealed that none of the participants in the doubt condition was aware that many of the sentences were related to doubt.

Participants then read a scenario that asked them to imagine that they were interested in buying a flat-panel television. The choice set consisted of two options, one from Samsung and one from Sony. To make one option focal, we followed Dhar and Simonson’s (1992) procedure and had participants write down one advantage and one disadvantage of either Samsung (*Samsung-focal* condition) or Sony (*Sony-focal* condition). Both are well-known brands, and every participant was able to list an advantage and disadvantage of the focal brand. Participants in these conditions then rated how difficult it was to indicate an advantage and disadvantage of the specified product, using an 11-point scale anchored at *very difficult* (–5) and *very easy* (5). Participants in a control group (*no-focal-option* condition) were not asked to think of an advantage or disadvantage of either product (and hence did not rate the difficulty of doing so). All participants indicated their preference for one of the two televisions on an 11-point scale, with Samsung on one endpoint and Sony on the other (left/right position was counterbalanced and had no influence on the results).

### Results

To check the effectiveness of the doubt prime, we examined participants’ ratings of how difficult it was to list a positive and negative feature of the specified brand. (Recall that

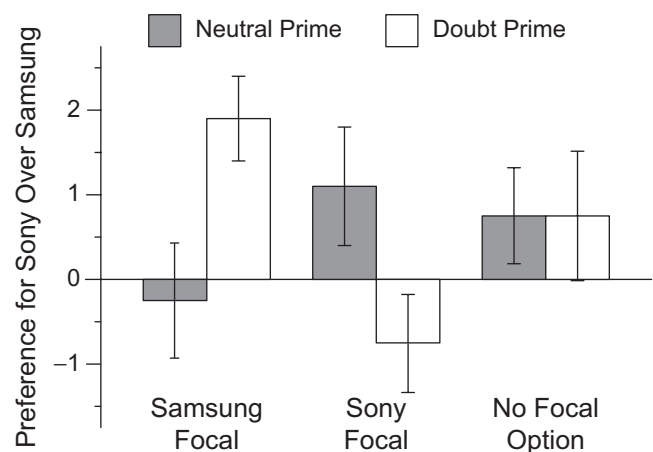
participants in the no-focal-option condition did not list an advantage and disadvantage and so did not provide difficulty ratings for this analysis.) A 2 (prime: neutral vs. doubt)  $\times$  2 (focal option: Samsung vs. Sony) analysis of variance (ANOVA) yielded only the predicted main effect of prime,  $F(1, 73) = 5.60, p = .021, \eta_p^2 = .07$ . Participants primed with doubt found it more difficult to report a positive and a negative attribute (–0.82) than did those in the neutral prime condition (0.97). The priming manipulation thus appears to have been effective.

A 2 (prime: neutral vs. doubt)  $\times$  3 (focal option: Samsung vs. Sony vs. none) ANOVA yielded only the predicted interaction between prime and focal option,  $F(2, 114) = 4.41, p = .014, \eta_p^2 = .07$ . As depicted in Figure 2, participants tended to favor the focal option if they had unscrambled neutral sentences, but not if they had unscrambled doubt-related sentences. To examine this pattern in more detail, we collapsed (with appropriate reverse-scoring) the two focal-option conditions and found that participants in the neutral-prime condition preferred the focal option ( $M = 0.73$ , with higher numbers indicating greater preference for the focal option) significantly more than participants in the doubt-prime condition ( $M = -1.20$ ),  $t(114) = 2.78, p = .006, d = 0.44$ .

These findings demonstrate that an increase in doubt undermines the usual preference for focal options. Participants primed with doubt exhibited a preference for the nonfocal option over the focal option. That an incidental feeling of doubt has the same effect as a self-chosen delay supports our contention that the attribution of doubt to the more salient option was responsible for the effects documented in Experiments 1 and 2.

### General Discussion

These studies demonstrate that delaying a choice and the activation of doubt influence choices in a consistent way.



**Fig. 2.** Brand preference as a function of focal option and prime condition in Experiment 3 ( $n = 20$  per cell). A positive preference score indicates a preference for Sony; a negative score indicates a preference for Samsung. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.



Experiments 1 and 2 demonstrate that choosing to delay making a choice leads people to select the normative option less often. Experiment 3 demonstrates that the activation of doubt has the same effect. Together, these studies suggest that electing to delay making a choice is taken as a sign of doubt about which option is best, a state that tends to be attributed disproportionately to the normative option, lessening its appeal.

This research was inspired by a curious regularity in electoral history: Undecided voters who end up casting ballots tend to vote against the incumbent. This regularity is curious because one might have expected the opposite result. Undecided voters are, by definition, uncertain, and one might expect them to deal with their uncertainty by clinging to the familiar candidate (the incumbent) and rejecting the unfamiliar candidate (the challenger). Our findings help to make sense of this curiosity, but also speak to a more general version of the same puzzle: Why does the sense of doubt that is bound up in delaying a choice not lead people to be more cautious and stick with the normative alternative?

Our answer is that the normative option is typically the most prominent option, and hence the most salient “target” to which one’s sense of doubt can be attributed. This implies that a sense of doubt may make people *more* likely to opt for the normative option when it is not more salient than the alternative. This might happen when the normative option is mundane, and the alternative has something thrilling about it. In such cases, a person’s doubts may not be disproportionately attached to the normative option, and hence it may not be disproportionately avoided. Also, the more personally consequential the decision, the less likely people may be to stray from the “safety” of the normative option (Miller & Taylor, 1995; Risen & Gilovich, 2007, 2008). Although the processes we have investigated may lead to doubts about the normative option, these doubts may not always be strong enough to overcome the fear that arises from the prospect of deviating from what most people would otherwise choose.

Some of the focal options we examined could be characterized as defaults—as fallback positions, or what people would tend to choose unless something occurred to make them choose otherwise. These might be described as “soft” defaults: general preferences for the focal option over the alternative, rather than options that would automatically be enacted unless one actively chose otherwise. Delaying a choice makes people less inclined to go with such soft defaults. Does delay have the same effect in the case of “harder” defaults, such as “opting in” when the default is to “opt out,” or vice versa (Johnson & Goldstein, 2003)? Only further research can answer this question, but there is reason to suspect that it would be harder to get people to turn away from firmer defaults. For one thing, the doubt that comes from delaying a choice might simply discourage people from making an active decision at all. Doing so would result in the default being “chosen” even if the delay fostered considerable doubt about it.

The current findings extend research by Simmons and Nelson (2006) on how people choose between “intuitive” and

nonintuitive options. Their work focused on situations in which one has a “gut” feeling that one option is best, but that feeling is opposed by deliberate, “rational” considerations. Simmons and Nelson found that feeling confident, even when confidence is induced from ancillary sources, makes people especially likely to go with their gut feeling. For example, they found that people who bet on sports events strongly prefer to bet on the favorite against the point spread (because their conviction that the favorite will win the game carries over to the more challenging bet against the spread). However, when participants were given a description of an upcoming game in a difficult-to-read font that prompted a vague, free-floating sense of uncertainty, they chose the favorite less often. We have shown that delaying a choice that could have been made earlier is seen as a cue that one is not confident of which alternative is best. That lack of confidence, in turn, makes people less likely to choose the normative alternative, or, in Simmons and Nelson’s terminology, the “intuitive option.”

Our research also extends the work of Bastardi and Shafir (1998), who also documented how a delay in making a choice can influence the choice that is ultimately made. In their research, the delay was accompanied by additional information that, had it been known from the outset, would not have influenced a person’s decision. But, having waited to receive this information, people felt compelled to take it into account and ended up choosing differently than they would have otherwise. Our research shows that the mere act of delaying a choice—without receiving additional information—can also influence what is chosen, leading individuals to veer away from prominent alternatives they would otherwise have selected.

Is it a good thing that after a delay, people are less enamored of descriptively normative options? When the status quo is arbitrary or the normative option would otherwise be mindlessly followed, the effect of delaying a choice will, on average, be positive. But normative options, such as defaults or the status quo, are often normative for a reason. They often represent the voice of experience and wisdom. Therefore, a tendency to depart from normative options may, in many circumstances, lead to decisions of lower average quality than those ordinarily made. Thus, there may be no overall answer to the question of whether the effects and processes we have reported here tend to help or hinder effective decision making. The clearest prescriptive implication, then, is that decision makers should be aware that the decision to delay making a choice is not a neutral act: It alters the choices they make in a predictable direction.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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## Notes

1. By normative option, we mean the option that most people would choose, following Webster's definition: "of, relating or conforming to . . . norms" (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1974, p. 783). Our usage does not imply that the normative option is the superior option.
2. We use the term default in its loose sense, to denote what is typically done, as in "The default is to play for a win at home and a tie on the road." We discuss implications for responses to stricter defaults—what will automatically be enacted unless one chooses otherwise—in the General Discussion.
3. To have participants choose between two articles about choice might seem ironic (and, in fact, the articles were chosen for that reason). But note that even if participants noticed this connection, it cannot account for the reported differences between conditions.
4. As in Experiment 1, these are conservative tests because all participants in the chosen-delay condition were included in the analysis, whether or not they delayed their choice. Seventy-six percent of participants in this condition did, in fact, choose to delay.

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