

Evidence for the influence of the mere-exposure effect on voting in the Eurovision Song Contest

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EVIDENCE FOR THE MERE EXPOSURE EFFECT IN THE EUROVISION SONG
CONTEST

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The mere exposure, or familiarity, effect is the tendency for people to feel more positive about stimuli to which they have previously been exposed. In 2004, the Eurovision Song Contest introduced a semifinal. As a two-stage event, in which some contestants in the final will be more familiar to viewers than others, voting in the Eurovision is likely to be influenced by the mere exposure effect. An analysis of the way in which contestant countries distributed their points (a function of how viewers voted in those countries) between 2004 and 2007 showed that contestants did better if they had appeared in a semifinal. Supporting the hypothesis that this was due to voter familiarity with the contestants, a separate analysis of data from 2008 to 2011 showed that countries gave more points to those countries that had appeared in the same semifinal as themselves. These results provide strong evidence for the existence of the mere exposure effect and the influence of this effect, alongside previously studied factors such as cultural and geographical closeness, on the way viewers vote in the Eurovision.

Keywords: Mere Exposure; Familiarity; Eurovision; Voting

Introduction

The mere exposure effect is the tendency for people to like something more given repeated exposure to it; the greater the degree of prior exposure, the more potent the effect. Mere exposure has been most famously studied by Robert Zajonc and, since his initial studies, has been found to be a tremendously robust effect - one that has been demonstrated in a huge array of different contexts. For example, Zajonc (1968) demonstrated that repeated exposure to nonsense words, Chinese ideographs, or photographs was enough to induce positive evaluations of the object. Subsequent studies have found that familiarity effects also influence liking for sounds, shapes, people, and names (Bornstein, 1989; Harmon-Jones & Allen, 2001). Amongst other things, mere exposure has been shown to affect food preference in infants (Houston-Price et al., 2009), ratings of journals by academics (Serenko & Bontis, 2011), gambling (Choliz, 2010), and voting behaviour in elections (Verhulst, Lodge, & Lavine, 2010). It has often been observed in studies of interpersonal attraction, where repeatedly encountering an individual increases ratings of how attractive and likeable they are (Peskin & Newell, 2004). Mere exposure has even been found to be effective when the stimuli are presented subliminally (Zajonc, 2001).

As already mentioned, the mere exposure effect has been shown to affect voting behaviour (Olivola & Todorov, 2010; Verhulst, Lodge, & Lavine, 2010). Olivola and Todorov found that both familiarity and perceptions of competency were associated with the share of votes achieved by political candidates in Senate elections in the USA. Verhulst et al. re-examined this analysis and gave greater primacy to familiarity. They concluded that perceptions of competency were actually mediated by familiarity and suggested that greater familiarity may result in candidates being perceived as more competent. As judgements of familiarity happen in part at a

preconscious level (Zajonc, 1968; Bornstein, 1989; Harmon-Jones & Allen, 2001), Verhulst et al. proposed that perceptions of competency in this context may be a rationalisation of preconscious perceptions of familiarity.

Most studies of familiarity and the mere exposure effect happen within a laboratory setting. Even studies that have looked at voting behaviour, where it seems that data should be available at a population level, have mostly limited themselves to working in the laboratory. This may be due to the difficulty of measuring exactly how familiar candidates are to voters prior to elections, as well as the myriad uncontrollable extraneous variables that influence the way in which individuals vote. However, prior familiarity with candidates can be well estimated in the Eurovision Song Contest. The Eurovision is a yearly extravaganza in which European countries (and some geographically close countries with strong links to Europe) are represented by a musical act from that country. The contest is televised and takes place over the course of an evening, during which time viewers can vote for the act which they thought the best. Votes within a country are collated after which each country distributes its points (1-8, 10, 12) to the various acts.

Since 2005, the Eurovision has used a two-stage voting system. From 2005 to 2008 there was a single semifinal: during the first stage (semifinal), voters were equally unfamiliar with all contestants. In the second stage (final), voters had already seen those acts that had to go through the semifinal, while they were unfamiliar with finalists who got to bypass the semifinal. Since 2009, there have been two semifinals in which all contestant countries (bar the host and the four main financial contributors) compete to determine who will appear in the final – half in semifinal 1, half in semifinal 2. Presumably, voters are more likely to watch the semifinal in which their own country competes, and thus will be more familiar with finalists who appeared in

the same semifinal as their own country. Both formats (2004-7 and 2008-) allow estimates of how familiar voters are with candidates/contestants that would be very hard to achieve in most studies of real-world voting.

Voting in the Eurovision has been the subject of much debate, and a number of studies have been conducted looking at the way in which countries tend to vote within blocs determined by cultural closeness (e.g., Gatherer, 2004; Fenn, Suleman, Efstathiou, & Johnson, 2006). Spierdijk & Vellekoop (2009) found that geographic proximity; religious, linguistic, and cultural congruence; and the presence of a substantial immigrant population from a contestant country can all influence the way in which countries distribute their points. Some commentators have argued that factors such as these, which go beyond the ‘quality’ of the songs and performances, undermine the purity of the contest, though others have countered that it is natural for voters to prefer songs from countries with which they share cultural connections, including, presumably, an overlap in musical tastes (Ginsburgh & Noury, 2008). Other studies of the Eurovision have found that expert judging panels are less affected by these kinds of factors than televoters (Haan, Dijkstra, & Dijkstra, 2005) and that acts that appear later in the final tend to receive more points (Bruine de Bruin, 2005).

This study adds to this literature, and examines whether the mere exposure effect also influences voting behaviour. Although data for this study are at the level of countries’ point allocations, given that these are based on the votes of individuals (approximately 600 million people watch the Eurovision every year; Murray, 2011), this study can also be considered to be a very highly powered study of the mere exposure effect itself.

Method

Procedure

Data were the results from the last eight years of the Eurovision song contest (2004-2011). 2004 was chosen as the first year as this was the year in which semifinals were introduced. For the first four of these years, there was a single semifinal in which all contestant countries (other than the four main sponsors and those who had been in the top 10 of the competition in the previous year) competed for 10 slots in the finals. From 2008, the semifinal was split in two, with all countries (other than the main four sponsors and the previous year's winner) having to compete in either the first or second semifinal. Ten slots in the main competition were available in each semifinal. It is assumed here that viewers were more likely to watch the semifinal in which their own country appeared. Given the change in format, it was necessary to analyse each tranche of data separately.

Data Analysis

For the data from 2004-7, there were two variables of interest: whether a country had appeared in the semifinal competition or not, and each country's total score in the finals. 24 countries took part in the competition each year, resulting in a total sample of 96 cases for this analysis.

Because two semifinals occurred instead of one, a different strategy had to be used for the 2008-11 data. Here, the specific scores given by each semifinalist to all other semifinalists were looked at. Scores given to the five countries which did not have to go through the semifinal procedure were ignored. Further, only scores given by those who appeared in one of the two semifinals were considered, as voters from these countries were more likely to have watched one or the other semifinal. There was no viewer voting in Norway in 2009 due to technical problems; as a result, scores given by Norway that year were excluded from analysis. Twenty semifinalists took part in the main competition each year, resulting in a total sample of 79 cases (not

including Norway in 2009) for this analysis. Two variables were of interest: which semifinal the country had participated in, and the number of points that were given by those in a particular semifinal to those who had or had not been in their semifinal during the main contest. The rationale behind this was that voters in the finals would be more likely to have seen other contestants previously if they had appeared in their own country's semifinals.

Results

Data from 2004-7 were analysed using an independent t-test. Groups were defined by whether or not a country had appeared in a semifinal. A sizable difference was observed, $t = 5.27, p < .001, d = 1.08$, wherein those countries that had previously appeared in a semifinal ($M = 136.25, SD = 71.19$) finished with a total score over twice as high as those who had not appeared in a semifinal ($M = 63.21, SD = 63.79$).

This finding was confirmed by the more complex analysis of data from 2008-11. A 2×2 mixed ANOVA was conducted (which semifinal the case appeared in [between group] \times total score given to finalists from semifinal 1 or 2 [within group]). A two-way interaction was apparent, $F(1,77) = 10.61, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .12$, wherein countries gave higher votes to participants who appeared in the same semifinal as themselves (see Fig. 1). Unrelated to the study's hypotheses, participants from the second semifinal ($M = 26.16, SD = 8.45$) did better than participants from the first ($M = 22.41, SD = 9.35$), $F(1,77) = 4.66, p = .034, \eta_p^2 = .06$.

Insert Figure 1 around here

Discussion

There was clear evidence that the mere exposure effect is at work during the Eurovision Song Contest. Acts that viewers had seen previously in a semifinal received more points than acts that they had not previously seen. In particular, the results of this study accord with the analysis presented by Verhulst et al. (2010), where they state that familiarity with a candidate is a key factor in determining whether an individual will vote for them. Although the mere exposure effect is extremely reliable and has been identified on numerous occasions (e.g., Zajonc, 1968; Bornstein, 1989), this study is unique in terms of the number of participants from which the data are derived. While only a small proportion of viewers actually vote, a viewing audience of approximately 600 million (Murray, 2011) means that the points each country distributes are based on the votes of a very large number of people. Of course, even if one only counts each participant country in each year, this still leads to a very respectable sample size for the two analyses.

The fact that the central hypothesis was supported by two different forms of analysis on separate data tranches provides an additional amount of credence to the findings. The use of two forms of analysis also allows for some alternative explanations to be ruled out. For example, it is possible that the effect seen in the first analysis (2004-7) is partially due to weaker acts being weeded out at the semifinal stage, making the acts that made it through relatively strong compared to the acts that did not have to go through the semifinals. However, this explanation is not tenable for the second analysis (2008-11), in which all acts went through the semifinal process.

The scope for the 2008-11 data to support the hypothesis was somewhat curtailed by the introduction in 2009 of an expert panel alongside televoting to determine how a country's points are distributed. This factor may help to explain why

the effect size for this data is weaker than that observed for the analysis of data from 2004-7.

Alongside the expected interaction effect in the second analysis, it was also observed that contestants who took part in the second semifinal did better than those who took part in the first. This may be a manifestation of the recency effect, which is most famously observed in studies of memory. In a study of order of appearance in the Eurovision, Bruine de Bruin (2005) found that a later appearance is associated with a higher final score, presumably due to memories of later acts being fresher and more vivid. An appearance in the second semifinal could similarly lead to people's memories for those acts being stronger while watching the final. Indeed, if there were such a memory effect it would further strengthen the influence of familiarity for those acts that appeared more recently. It could also be the case that viewership figures are greater for the second semifinals (as excitement builds in the run up to the finals); again, if more people have seen the acts from the second semifinal, this would strengthen the effect of familiarity.

Although this study has a number of strengths, it is difficult to disentangle the effect of just one phenomenon (familiarity) from all of the other factors that have been shown to determine how viewers vote and, subsequently, how countries distribute their points. Apart from the quality of acts, geographic proximity; religious, linguistic, and cultural congruence; the presence of a substantial immigrant population from a contestant country, and, as noted above, the order of appearance all play a role. While a reasonable supposition, it's also impossible to say for sure that viewers from a particular country are more likely to watch the semifinal in which their country competes. Nonetheless, the replication of the result of the first analysis with a

separate sample and a different analytic technique provides strong support for the position that familiarity should be added to the above list.

This study used data from Eurovision Song Contests since the introduction of semifinal voting (in 2004) to determine whether the way in which viewers vote (and, consequently, the way in which countries distribute their points) is influenced by the mere exposure, or familiarity, effect. In two separate analyses, an effect consistent with this hypothesis was observed. In the first, countries that took part in a semifinal gained more points in the final than those that did not; in the second, countries gave more points in the final to those countries who appeared in the same semifinal as themselves. This is strong evidence for the existence of the mere exposure effect, and, more specifically, strong evidence that this effect is at work in the Eurovision Song Contest.

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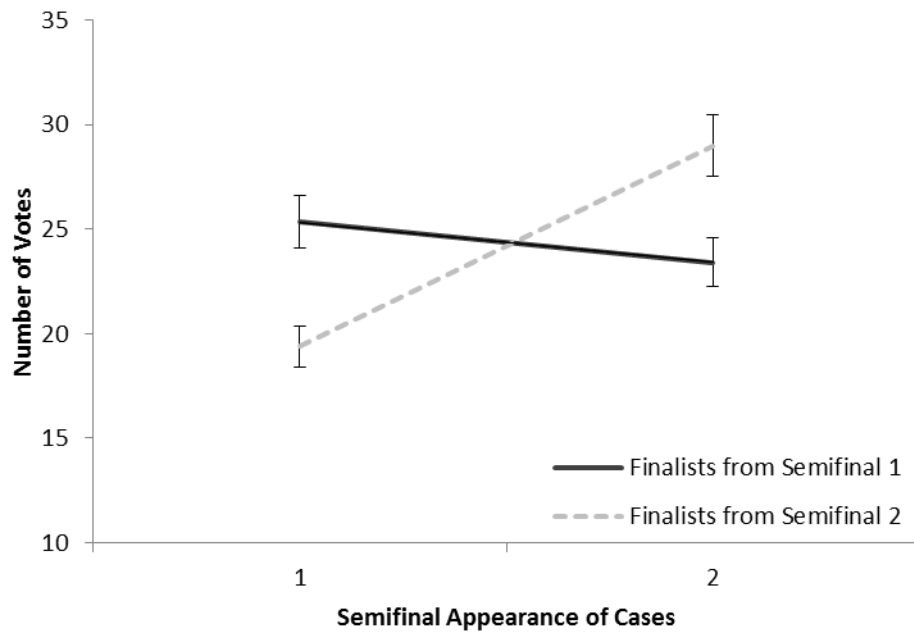


Figure 1. Number of votes given by finalists who appeared in Semifinal 1 or 2 to other finalists who appeared in one of the two Semifinals. (Error bars indicate standard error.)