

RUNNING HEAD: Regulatory focus and political decision making

Regulatory Focus and Political Decision Making:  
When People Favor Reform Over the Status Quo

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Two studies examined the impact of self-reported use of promotion-related (i.e., eagerness) and prevention-related (i.e., vigilance) strategies when making “risky” or “conservative” decisions about economic reform under good, average, or poor economic conditions. Consistent with regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998, 2000), in both studies strategic vigilance was associated with making a conservative choice, whereas strategic eagerness was associated with making a risky choice. In addition, along with perceptions of economic conditions, chronic strength of prevention focus (Study 1) or situationally-induced prevention focus (Study 2) was associated with using strategic vigilance, whereas chronic strength of promotion focus (Study 1) or situationally-induced promotion focus (Study 2) was associated with using strategic eagerness. Finally, regulatory focus and economic perceptions indirectly predicted economic reform decisions through their impact on strategy use. Our studies are the first to demonstrate that vigilant or eager strategy use is associated with “conservative” or “risky” political decisions.

(150 words)

Citizens, faced with the choice between an incumbent and a challenger or between the political party in office and that in opposition, must decide for whom they will vote. Furthermore, at times they are asked to vote for or against substantive policies that, if implemented, could lead to changes in current economic or social conditions. At these times, politicians and political parties mount campaigns designed, among other things, to influence individuals' choices regarding preserving the status quo or voting for change. Thus, understanding the factors that influence this choice is important.

Decision-making involves choosing between at least two options and, because the outcome matters, this choice is motivated. Thus, political campaigns often point out the benefits of choosing one alternative over others. These are designed to 'persuade' voters that one alternative is of greater relative 'value' than the other. This framing is based on the assumption that individuals will choose the option that has the greatest value for them.

Rational choice models (e.g., Becker, 1978) argue that individuals weigh up the costs and benefits of the outcomes of different alternatives and choose the one that maximizes benefits and minimizes costs (i.e., the alternative with the greatest value). However, the same outcome can have different value to different individuals. For example, when choosing between change and the status quo, the outcomes associated with change may be more valuable to some individuals whereas those associated with the status quo may be more valuable to others. Furthermore, particular outcomes may be more valuable to an individual at some times rather than at others. The particular cognitive operations and representations that influence the perceived value of outcomes have been examined (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1979, for a review, see Thaler, 1999).

Prevailing conditions also influence the choice of the change over the status quo. At times, change is risky whereas at other times maintaining the status quo is risky. For

example, in times of economic prosperity, change is risky because it potentially threatens this prosperity. In contrast, in times of economic hardship, the status quo is risky because failing to change may continue the hardship. Thus, not surprisingly, incumbents (i.e., the status quo) have the advantage in elections preceded by periods of prosperity rather than in those preceded by periods of poor economic performance (e.g., Kiewiet & Rivers, 1984; Nadeau & Lewis-Beck, 2001). Furthermore, incumbents' "track records", particularly in terms of economic performance, influence voting (Duch & Stevenson, 2005). These results suggest that voters have beliefs about the value of the outcomes associated with the status quo and change. Furthermore, they suggest that voters have beliefs about how likely it is that these outcomes might occur. Thus, expectancy-value models (e.g., Lewin, Dembo, Festinger, & Sears, 1944; Vroom, 1964) have been used to examine political decision-making.

Expectancy-value models propose that motivation is a multiplicative function of the expectancy of attaining a particular outcome and its value. However, when decisions involve gains and losses, gains appear to have less impact than losses of the same magnitude (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979, 1984). As a result, "certain" losses loom larger than "certain" corresponding gains and individuals take greater risks to avoid losses than to achieve gains. Similarly, uncertainty about the occurrence of gains and losses reduces the perceived intensity of gains more than the perceived intensity of losses (Tversky & Kahneman, 1992).

Expectancy-value models and consideration of how gains and losses are discounted have proved useful in understanding political decision-making (e.g., Klandermans, 1997; McDermott & Kugler, 2001; Quattrone & Tversky, 1988). However, recent evidence indicates that how outcomes are framed influences how expectancy and value interact (Shah & Higgins, 1997). To the extent that outcomes are framed as aspirations,

expectancy and value have a positive interactive effect on their pursuit. In contrast, to the extent that outcomes are framed as necessities, the expectancy-value interaction is either negative or has no impact because when something is a necessity, like removing ourselves from immediate danger, we have to commit to taking action even if the likelihood of success is low. Furthermore, individuals' orientations influence the discounting of gains and losses. Idson, Liberman, and Higgins (2000) found that losses are experienced more intensely by those oriented to meeting necessities than by those oriented to attaining advancement and accomplishment, whereas the reverse is true for gains. Likewise, those oriented to meeting necessities discount losses more than gains and this discounting is not as pronounced for those oriented to attaining aspirations (Halamish, Liberman, Higgins, & Idson, 2008).

These recent results can be understood using some of the propositions of Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT; Higgins, 1997, 1998, 2000). According to RFT, self-regulation operates differently depending on which of two fundamentally different needs it serves. Self-regulation can serve nurturance needs (i.e., the attainment of aspirations and advancement) or security needs (i.e., ensuring safety and survival). When outcomes are construed as necessities, these must be met to ensure safety and survival (Shah & Higgins, 1997). As a result, the likelihood that these outcomes will occur is not as relevant to any decision to pursue them and, hence, differences in expectancy have either no impact or a negative impact as valued outcomes become necessities. In contrast, when outcomes are construed as opportunities for advancement and accomplishment, the likelihood of attaining them is relevant and expectancy positively interacts with value to predict their pursuit.

When self-regulating with regard to nurturance needs, individuals focus on the presence or absence of positive outcomes (i.e., gain and non-gains) and are promotion-

focused. In contrast, when self-regulating with regard to security needs, individuals focus on the presence or absence of negative outcomes (i.e., losses and non-losses) and are prevention-focused. Thus, if one is oriented toward advancement and accomplishment (i.e., attaining gains), it is not surprising that gains have a differential impact and are discounted less than when one is oriented toward ensuring necessities (i.e., preventing losses).

Individuals differ in the extent to which they are chronically promotion- and prevention-focused. These differences arise from experiences with caregivers (Higgins & Silberman, 1998). Caregivers who emphasize advancement, aspirations, and accomplishments socialize children to be promotion-focused. In contrast, those who emphasize protection, safety, and responsibility socialize children to be prevention focused. Depending on the particular combination of caregiver emphases, individuals can come to be chronically promotion- or prevention-focused or have a combination of the two self-regulatory predilections, such as being high in both or low in both (Higgins, 2000; Higgins, Friedman, Harlow, Idson, Ayduk, & Taylor, 2000; Idson et al., 2000).

Situations can also temporarily induce a promotion or prevention focus. Tasks framed in terms of “gains” versus “non-gains” activate a promotion focus whereas those framed in terms of “losses” versus “non-losses” activate a prevention focus (e.g., Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997). Likewise, momentarily focusing on hopes and aspirations, which predominantly promotion-focused individuals do chronically, induces a promotion focus, whereas focusing on duties and obligations, which predominantly prevention-focused individuals do chronically, induces a prevention focus (e.g., Liberman, Molden, Idson, & Higgins, 2001). Thus, regulatory focus is also a situational factor (Higgins, 2000; Idson et al., 2000). As political campaigns are often couched in terms of issues relating to aspirations and advancement or to safety and

security (e.g., education or social security, Druckman, 2004), this framing might induce one or the other regulatory focus. Thus, it is important to examine how being promotion- and prevention-focused is related to political decision-making. Understanding how this might occur comes from consideration of the remaining propositions of RFT.

RFT proposes that promotion- and prevention-focused self-regulation are differentially associated with preferences for change over the status quo. Prevention-focused individuals, because of their concern with the absence of negative outcomes and potential losses, prefer stability because change potentially is associated with the presence of negative outcomes or losses. In contrast, promotion-focused individuals, because of their concern with the presence of positive outcomes and potential gains, prefer change as a new situation that may yield advancement. Consistent with this proposition, in five studies, Liberman, Idson, Camacho, and Higgins (1999) demonstrated that not only are prevention-focused individuals less likely to change tasks than promotion-focused individuals, they are also less likely to exchange currently- or previously-owned objects for new ones. Brodscholl, Kober, and Higgins (2007) demonstrated that prevention-focused individuals emphasize *maintenance* of a desired state whereas promotion-focused individuals emphasize *attainment* of a desired state.

It has also been proposed that promotion- and prevention-focused self-regulation is a natural fit with two distinct means of goal attainment (Cesario, Higgins, & Scholer, 2007; Higgins, 1997, 1998, 2000). According to RFT, eager means include considering more alternatives, maximizing gains, and being creative, enthusiastic, and riskier as these maximize the presence of positive outcomes that is of concern to promotion-focused individuals. As such, they ‘fit’ promotion-focused self-regulation. In contrast, vigilant means include considering fewer alternatives, minimizing losses, doing what is necessary, and being less creative and more cautious as these maximize the absence of

negative outcomes that is of concern to prevention-focused individuals. As such, they ‘fit’ prevention-focused self-regulation.

A number of studies have demonstrated the differential associations between promotion- and prevention-focused self-regulation and risky and conservative decisions. In recognition memory tasks, promotion-focused individuals generally display a risky bias (i.e., are more likely to respond “yes”) whereas prevention-focused individuals display a conservative bias (i.e., are more likely to respond “no”) (Crowe & Higgins, 1997). Similarly, promotion-focused individuals are generally more creative and generate more hypotheses than prevention-focused individuals because of their riskier response bias and memory search for novel items (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Friedman & Förster, 2001; Liberman et al., 2001). This riskiness extends to economic decisions (see Murali, Böckenholt, & Laroche, 2007; Zhou & Pham, 2004). Compared to prevention-focused individuals, promotion-focused individuals are willing to invest more money in a riskier investment option (e.g., an online trading account) and more likely to choose the dominant option (i.e., a product that has very attractive and very unattractive attributes – the risky option) over the compromise option (i.e., a product that has all moderately attractive attributes – the conservative option).

In summary, RFT proposes that promotion-focused individuals generally prefer change and are riskier than prevention-focused individuals. However, preferences for change over stability may be, in part, dependent on the perceptions of current conditions. If conditions are neither good nor bad, which represents both the absence of positive *and* negative outcomes, promotion-focused individuals should choose change (i.e., the opportunity for a potential gain) whereas prevention-focused individuals should choose the status quo (i.e., avoiding the possibility of a potential loss). However, when conditions are clearly good or clearly bad, this may not be the case. When conditions are

bad, individuals may become more risky and willing to change — tactics normally associated with eager strategies — when making their decision, thereby potentially removing the negative outcomes in the current situation (see Scholer, Zou, Fujita, Stroessner, & Higgins, in press). Similarly, when conditions are good or potentially good, individuals may become conservative and careful - tactics normally associated with vigilant strategies - to maintain the positive outcomes in the current situation. Thus, perceptions of current conditions are likely associated with the use of eager and vigilant strategies. However, given RFT propositions, the extents to which individuals are promotion- or prevention-focused also likely influence strategy use.

Being promotion- or prevention-focused not only influences the types of decisions individuals make but also the value they place on their outcomes. When individuals make decisions using strategies that match (i.e., fit) their regulatory focus (e.g., promotion-focused individuals using eager strategies), the choice outcomes have greater monetary value than when strategies are used that do not match (Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, & Molden, 2003). Similarly, individuals are more persuaded by advertisements for products when the products are described in a manner that fit the regulatory focus of the message recipient (e.g., Aaker & Lee, 2001; Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004; Lee & Aaker, 2004), further suggesting that “fit” impacts value. Thus, for those who are promotion-focused, using eager strategies increases the value of a chosen alternative, whereas for those who are prevention-focused, using vigilant strategies increases the value of the choice.

Although regulatory focus is proposed to influence strategic preferences, that is, eager strategies are preferred by promotion-focused individuals and vigilant strategies are preferred by prevention-focused individuals, whether individuals actually report using these strategies has not been investigated. However, those who are promotion-focused

should report using eager strategies more than vigilant ones. In contrast, those who are prevention-focused should report using vigilant strategies more than eager ones.

Examining whether this is the case was one aim of the two studies reported here.

A second aim was to examine the impact of current conditions on self-reported eagerness or vigilance. Although research has demonstrated that current economic conditions have an impact on voting in US presidential elections (e.g., Nadeau & Lewis-Beck, 2001), whether economic conditions have a direct impact on voting for change over the status quo, or whether they have an impact through how eager or vigilant individuals are, has not been investigated. Investigating this question was a second aim of the current studies.

In our studies we focused on decisions concerning economic outcomes. Of major interest was the impact of promotion-focused strategic eagerness and prevention-focused strategic vigilance on decisions of whether to vote for a risky economic alternative rather than the conservative status quo. Based on the logic of RFT, we predicted that strategic eagerness would be associated with the risky option of change, and strategic vigilance would be associated with the conservative option of maintaining the status quo. Moreover, we predicted that the extent to which individuals are chronically promotion-focused (Study 1) or have a situationally-induced promotion focus (Study 2) would be related to their use of eager strategies, and that the extent to which individuals are chronically prevention-focused (Study 1) or have a situationally-induced prevention focus (Study 2) would be related the use of vigilant strategies. We also examined the impact of perceptions of economic conditions on voting for change over the status quo and the use of eager and vigilant strategies.

We examined voting in a hypothetical referendum for government-proposed economic reforms in two studies. Referenda have becoming increasingly popular

worldwide (Neijens & van Praag, 2005). In Australia there have been 44 referenda since 1906, the last occurring in 1999 to decide if Australia would become a republic. Thus, we reasoned that our participants (Australian university students) would be aware of the nature of referenda. Of interest in both studies was whether the extent to which participants made their decision using eager strategies or vigilant strategies would predict decisions for change (risky choice) or stability (conservative choice). In addition, we examined whether the use of these strategies is related to the extent to which individuals were chronically promotion- or prevention-focused (Study 1) or in a situationally-induced promotion or prevention focus (Study 2), respectively, in economic conditions described as “good”, “average”, and “poor”.

We did not consider the role of political ideology in our studies for a few reasons. Although some have proposed that political ideology is related to regulatory focus (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Thorisdottir, Jost, Livistan, & Shrout, 2007), operationalized as the extent to which one reports being on the left or right of the political spectrum and/or voting for the Democrats or the Republicans (in the United States), there is no such clear distinction between the political left and right in Australia. Two major political parties, the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal Party, dominate Australian politics. These were once aligned with the political left and right, respectively. However, in recent times, both have moved towards the center-right and have similar policies on all major social and economic issues (Johanson & Glow, 2008). Furthermore, in a pilot study using a different student sample ( $N = 127$ ) we found that, although 60% of our participants reported voting for one of these two major parties,<sup>1</sup> 70% reported that they were not politically active. In addition, voting for these parties was unrelated to the extents to which individuals were promotion- or prevention-focused.

We were also not concerned with the choice of voting for particular political parties. Rather, we were interested in whether regulatory focus and current economic conditions have an impact on the choice for a risky change in economic policy over the conservative status quo. In the United States, individuals' positions on economic policy issues have only a weak impact on their self-reported political identification (Conover & Feldman, 1981). Furthermore, although self-identified conservative and liberal voters in the United States have relatively conservative and liberal views on economic policy issues, there is considerable variability in their views, and the views of political moderates cover the full spectrum (Treier & Hillygus, 2009).

### Study 1

This study was designed to examine the impact of the promotion- or prevention-related strategies of eagerness and vigilance on the decision of whether to support proposed economic reforms, described as a risky, under economic conditions described as “good”, “average”, or “poor”. We predicted that the use of eager or vigilant strategies would be associated, respectively, with the risky or the status quo (conservative) decisions. In addition, we predicted that the use of these strategies would be related to the extent to which individuals were, respectively, promotion-focused and prevention-focused.

#### *Method*

*Participants.* One hundred and fifty-two participants, 43 males, 108 females, and 1 who did not specify their gender, enrolled in a second-year Psychology subject agreed to participate as part of a laboratory class exercise. They ranged in age from 18 to 48 years ( $M = 21.92$  years,  $SD = 5.23$ ). No payment was made for participation.

*Materials and Procedure.* As part of a larger study, to assess the extents to which participants were chronically promotion- and prevention- focused, participants first completed Higgins et al.'s (2001) 11-item Regulatory Focus Questionnaire. This questionnaire assesses participants' subjective histories of success at promotion- and prevention-focused self-regulation. These two orthogonal scales consist of six promotion-related items (e.g., "How often have you accomplished things that got you "psyched" to work even harder?") and five prevention-related items (e.g., Not being careful enough has gotten me into trouble at times [reverse scored]) that are rated on 5-point likert scales from *never or seldom* (1) to *very often* (5). The mean level of endorsement across scale items was calculated. Both scales had adequate internal consistency (promotion success, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .70$ ; prevention success, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .77$ ).

Participants then read one of three 'economic' reports designed to portray Australian economic conditions as good ( $N = 37$ ), average ( $N = 69$ ), or poor ( $N = 46$ ) in the preceding financial year (see Appendix 1).<sup>2</sup> Once they had read the report, participants were asked to indicate, based on the report, their perceptions of Australia's economic conditions, on a scale from *very bad* (-5) to *very good* (+5). They then read that the Australian Government had decided that Australia's economic future could only be assured by sweeping economic reforms and that, following wide consultation with the economic community, they wished to introduce a range of economic reforms, including changing current investment strategies and modifying the social welfare system. Finally, they read that these reforms could only be instituted with the support of the Australian electorate and that the "Australian Government is proposing reforms that have never been instituted in an OECD nation before. These reforms are unusual. Although representing a risky alternative, nevertheless they may improve Australia's economic outlook

significantly.” Participants then indicated whether they supported the proposed reforms, by checking a box labelled “Yes” or “No”.

Once participants had made their decision, they indicated on 5-point likert scales, from *not at all* (1) to *very* (5), the extent to which, when making their decision about voting for or not voting for the proposed economic changes, they were being enthusiastic and thinking about maximizing Australia’s future (i.e., two of the eager strategies proposed by RFT to be a fit with promotion-focused self-regulation), and being careful or thinking about what was necessary in order to ensure Australia’s future (i.e., two of the vigilant strategies proposed by RFT to be a fit with prevention-focused self-regulation). The mean of the extents to which participants used the two eager strategies and the two vigilant strategies were taken as indices of strategy use. Finally, participants provided demographic information, including sex and age.

### *Results and Discussion*

*Australian economic position.* We first examined perceptions of the economic conditions of Australia as a function of provided economic reports. Consistent with these reports, economic perceptions differed across them,  $F(2, 149) = 255.51, p < .001, \eta^2 = .79$ . Those who read the ‘good report’ rated conditions as better,  $M = 4.24, SD = .98$ , than those who read the ‘average report’,  $M = 1.23, SD = 1.89$ , who, in turn, rated them as better than those who read the ‘poor report’,  $M = -2.78, SD = 1.09$ . In addition, the impact of economic conditions on economic perceptions was linear,  $F(1, 149) = 507.10, p < .001$ .

*Descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses.* Overall, participants were moderately promotion-focused,  $M = 3.36, SD = .55$ , and moderately prevention-focused,  $M = 3.35, SD = .56$ . Consistent with Higgins et al.’s (2001) results, these factors were not

related,  $r(152) = .10$ ,  $p = .239$ . Furthermore, promotion- and prevention-focus strengths were unrelated to perceptions of Australia's current economic conditions, both  $r_s(152) < .05$ . Participants indicated that they used both eager,  $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = .81$ , and vigilant strategies,  $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = .77$ , to a moderate extent when they made their decision to support or not support the proposed reforms. In addition, the extents to which they used these two strategies were unrelated,  $r(152) = .05$ . Finally, 73 participants (54%) voted for the proposed economic reforms and this was associated with economic conditions,  $\chi^2(2) = 7.61$ ,  $p = .021$ . Not surprisingly, fewer participants ( $N = 13$ , 35%) voted for reform when conditions were good. However, the percentage voting for reform did not differ significantly between the average ( $N = 31$ , 63%) and poor ( $N = 41$ , 59%) conditions.

*Decision to support economic reform ("Yes"; "No").* We tested the prediction that eager strategy use would be associated with voting for reform (coded "1") whereas vigilant strategy use would be associated with voting for stability (coded "0"), and that the use of these strategies would mediate the impact of the strengths of promotion and prevention focus using structural equation modelling carried out in Mplus 5.21 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2009). As the strengths of promotion- and prevention-focus, and economic perceptions were skewed, these variables were transformed prior to the analyses.

As voting for reform was not clearly associated with reported economic conditions and individuals tend to vote for change when economic conditions are poor (e.g., Kiewiet & Rivers, 1984; Nadeau & Lewis-Beck, 2001), we included perceptions of economic conditions in this analysis rather than examining differences as a function of the provided reports. We examined whether these perceptions have a direct impact on voting for reform or stability or through eager and vigilant strategy use. Furthermore, as it was possible that the strength of promotion focus might have less impact on eager strategy use

when economic conditions are perceived as “worse” than when they are “better” and that the strength of prevention focus might have less impact on vigilant strategy use when economic conditions are perceived as “better” than when they are “worse”, we included the interactions of economic perceptions with the extents of promotion and prevention focus in an initial model.

This model was a poor fit to the data, assessed using the  $\chi^2$  index,  $\chi^2(2) = 21.98, p < .001$ .<sup>3</sup> However, as this index is strongly affected by sample size, we examined the fit using three other indices that are less affected by sample size, specifically the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), the comparative fit indices (CFI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Values of the TLI and CFI exceeding .90 and smaller values of the RMSEA indicate good fit. All three indices indicated that the model was a poor fit, TFI = .62, CFI = .63, RMSEA = .27.

Examination of the beta weights for the interaction between economic perceptions with the strengths of promotion and prevention focus indicated that these were not significant, both  $\beta$ s < .08. As a result, we deleted these from the model. The resulting model was a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(2) = 2.67, p = .263$ , TLI = .96, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .05, and accounted for 42% of the variance in economic decisions. Consistent with predictions, greater use of eagerness strategies was associated with voting for reform whereas greater use of vigilant strategies was associated with voting for the status quo (see Figure 1). However, the direct paths from perceived economic conditions and those from promotion- and prevention-focused strengths were not significant, all  $\beta$ s < .06. In contrast, economic perceptions were related to strategy use. Perceiving conditions as better was associated with greater use of vigilant strategies and lower use of eagerness strategies.

The strength of promotion focus and economic perceptions were associated with eager strategy use whereas strength of prevention focus was not,  $\beta = -.09, p = .263$ . Similarly, the strength of prevention focus and economic perceptions were associated with vigilant strategy use whereas strength of promotion focus was not,  $\beta = -.11, p = .419$ . In addition, more importantly, the indirect paths from the strength of promotion,  $\beta = .17, p = .008$ , and prevention focus,  $\beta = .12, p = .012$ , to economic reform decision through eager and vigilant strategy use were significant. Likewise, the indirect paths from economic perceptions to economic reform decision through eager,  $\beta = -.14, p = .009$ , and vigilant,  $\beta = .11, p = .008$ , strategy use were significant. Thus, eager strategy use mediated the impact of promotion focus strength and economic perceptions whereas vigilant strategy use mediated the impact of promotion focus strength and economic perceptions.

The results of this study are the first to demonstrate that the self-reported use of strategic eagerness is associated with voting for change, whereas the self-reported use of strategic vigilance is associated with voting for the status quo. Furthermore, they demonstrate, consistent with the propositions of RFT (Higgins, 1997, 1998, 2000), that being more chronically promotion-focused is associated only with using eager strategies whereas being more chronically prevention-focused is associated only with using vigilant strategies. In addition, the results indicate that perceptions of economic conditions are associated with the use of these strategies. When conditions are perceived to be relatively good, individuals are more likely to use vigilant strategies. In contrast, when economic conditions are perceived to be relatively poor, individuals are more likely to use eagerness strategies. However, economic perceptions neither had a direct impact on voting for reform nor moderated the impact of promotion- and prevention-focus strengths.

As this study was correlational, it precludes conclusions about any causal links between having a promotion or prevention focus and being strategically eager or vigilant, respectively. Thus, the question of whether the relations found in this study for chronic motivational orientations also occur when a promotion or prevention focus is situationally induced remains unanswered. Furthermore, our finding that the impact of economic perceptions on voting for change over the status quo is mediated by the use of eager and vigilant strategies requires replication. Study 2 was designed to address these issues.

## Study 2

### *Method*

*Participants.* Two hundred and seventy-two students enrolled in a second-year Psychology course, 62 males and 208 females and 2 who did not specify their gender, agreed to participate as part of a laboratory class exercise. (None had participated in Study 1.) They ranged in age from 18 to 40 years ( $M = 21.47$  years,  $SD = 3.41$ ). No payment was made for participation.

*Materials and Procedure.* The materials and procedure for this study were identical to that of Study 1 with one major exception. Before reading the description of the economic conditions, participants were asked, based on random assignment, to write about either their personal hopes and aspirations (i.e., promotion ideals) or their personal duties and obligations (i.e., prevention oughts), thereby inducing either a promotion or a prevention focus, respectively (Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994; Freitas, Liberman, & Higgins, 2002; Liberman et al., 2001). In all, 143 (53%) wrote about hopes and aspirations (promotion) and 129 (47%) wrote about duties and obligations

(prevention). Furthermore, 90 (33%) read the good, 88 (32%) the average, and 94 (35%) the poor economic reports.

### *Results and Discussion*

*Australian economic position.* As in Study 1, perceptions of Australia's current economic conditions as a function of economic report were examined. As expected, economic perceptions differed across them,  $F(2, 269) = 5.51, p < .001, \eta^2 = .81$ . As in Study 1, those who read the 'good report' rated conditions as better,  $M = 3.81, SD = 1.28$ , than those who read the 'average report',  $M = 1.56, SD = 1.35$ , who, in turn, rated them as better than those who read the 'poor report',  $M = -2.71, SD = 1.42$ . Similarly, the impact of economic conditions on economic perceptions was linear,  $F(1, 269) = 1069.81, p < .001$ .

*Descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses.* Participants indicated that they were using eager,  $M = 3.22, SD = .84$ , and vigilant strategies,  $M = 3.57, SD = .76$ , to a moderate degree when making their decision to support or not support the proposed reforms. Furthermore, the use of these strategies was unrelated,  $r(272) = .09, p = .150$ . One hundred and thirty-five participants (50%) indicated that they would vote for the proposed economic reforms. Furthermore, voting for reform was marginally associated with economic condition reports,  $\chi^2(2) = 5.82, p = .054$ . As in Study 1, those who read the poor report were more likely to vote for reform ( $N = 56, 60%$ ) than those who read the average ( $N = 42, 47%$ ) and good ( $N = 37, 43%$ ) reports. Finally, there were no differences in economic perceptions as a function of regulatory focus,  $F(1, 271) = .04, p = .834$ .

*Decision to support economic reform ("Yes"; "No").* As in Study 1, we used Mplus 5.21 to examine the predictors of economic reform decision. The nature of this analysis

was similar to that conducted in Study 1. However, because regulatory focus was induced, we included this factor as a categorical variable (promotion focus coded “1”, prevention focus coded “-1”). As both strategy use variables and economic perceptions were skewed, these were transformed before conducting this analysis.

The model was a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.17, p = .075$ , CFI = .98, RMSEA = .05, and accounted for 34% of the variance in economic decisions.<sup>4</sup> As in Study 1, voting for economic reform was associated with greater use of eager strategies and lower use of vigilant strategies (see Figure 2) but not with induced regulatory focus or economic perceptions, both  $\beta s < .09$ . However, also consistent with the results of Study 1, when economic conditions were perceived as better, vigilant strategy use was greater and eager strategy use was lower. In addition, those in a promotion focus were more likely to use eager, and less likely to use vigilant, strategies. In contrast, those in a prevention focus were more likely to use vigilant, and less likely to use eager, strategies. Finally, economic perceptions had an indirect effect on voting for reform through vigilant,  $\beta = .13, p = .021$ , and eager,  $\beta = -.16, p = .012$ , strategy use, as did induced regulatory focus (eager strategy use,  $\beta = .10, p = .010$ ; vigilant strategy use,  $\beta = -.11, p = .018$ ).

Together the results of this study indicate that, consistent with predictions and Study 1 findings, eager strategy use was associated with making the risky decision for change whereas vigilant strategy use was associated with making the conservative decision of retaining the status quo. In addition, consistent with predictions and the RFT propositions, eager and vigilant strategy use was a function of induced regulatory focus. Specifically, promotion-focused individuals were more likely to use eager strategies and less likely to use vigilant strategies whereas the reverse was true for prevention-focused individuals. Finally, as in Study 1, economic perceptions were not directly related to the decision of choosing reform over the status quo. Furthermore, they did not moderate the

impact of induced regulatory focus on the decision. Rather, as economic conditions were perceived to be better, the use of eager strategies decreased and the use of vigilant strategies increased.

### Summary and Conclusions

Previous studies in other domains have found that when promotion- or prevention-focused individuals make decisions, promotion-focused individuals generally tend to be more risky (*vs.* conservative) and more willing to change (*vs.* maintaining the status quo) than prevention-focused individuals (e.g., Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Freitas et al., 2002; Friedman & Förster, 2001; Liberman et al., 1999; Liberman et al., 2001; Zhou & Pham, 2004). Our results indicate that this also occurs in the political domain of economic decision-making. However, our results indicate that this decision is not simply associated with being promotion- or prevention-focused. Rather, the impact on a decision of the extent to which individuals are chronically promotion- or prevention-focused (Study 1) or are in a situationally-induced promotion or prevention focus (Study 2) is mediated by the extent to which individuals use the eager and vigilant strategies proposed to be a ‘natural’ fit, respectively, with promotion- and prevention-focused self-regulation (Higgins, 1997, 1998, 2000). Moreover, our studies show that the use of these strategies is also affected by individuals’ perceptions of the extent to which current conditions are good or bad.

The results concerning the unique associations of economic perceptions with eager and vigilant strategy use suggest that their use might partially account for findings such as those that demonstrate incumbents’ advantage (*i.e.*, the status quo) in elections preceded by periods of prosperity than in those preceded by periods of poor economic performance (e.g., Kiewiet & Rivers, 1984; Nadeau & Lewis-Beck, 2001). It appears that individuals assess current economic conditions and these assessments somehow prompt

them to be more eager (willing to change) or more vigilant (maintain the status quo) when they vote. This result is entirely consistent with our analysis of situations that are assessed as relatively good and bad. In situations that are bad, there are negative outcomes that “need” to be removed. This can be achieved by being eager (e.g., being willing to change and take chances for attainment). In contrast, in situations that are clearly good there are positive outcomes that “need” to be retained. This can be achieved by being vigilant (e.g., doing what is needed to maintain the satisfactory state).

The unique associations of promotion and prevention focus — whether chronic predispositions (Study 1) or situationally induced (Study 2) — with eager and vigilant strategy use, respectively, support the propositions of RFT (Higgins, 1997, 1998, 2000). Our studies found that when the extent of prevention focus was statistically controlled, the more that individuals were promotion-focused, the more they used the eager strategies of being enthusiastic and maximizing outcomes. Similarly, when the extent of promotion focus was statistically controlled, the more that individuals were prevention-focused, the more they used the vigilant strategies of being careful and doing what is necessary. The mediation by eager and vigilant strategy use on the decision to vote for reform versus the status quo was also as expected. In both studies, having a promotion focus had an indirect effect on voting for reform through eager strategy use, whereas having a prevention focus had an indirect effect of voting for the status quo through vigilant strategy use.

Our studies are not without their limitations. First, we assumed that political ideology was unrelated to chronic regulatory focus, based on the current state of Australian politics (Johanson & Glow, 2008) and the results of our pilot study. Further, we assumed that ideology would play a small part in economic decision-making. Thus, we did not include this factor in either study. However, as we induced regulatory focus in Study 2 and found

equivalent results to those of Study 1, this suggests that political ideology was not a major factor influencing Study 1 results. Despite this, future studies, particularly those conducted in the United States where ideology appears to be especially relevant (e.g., Jost et al., 2003), could examine this possibility. Second, we focused on voting for change over the status quo in a hypothetical situation where change was described as risky. Whether individuals would actually choose change over the status quo when change is described as risky when their choice has real consequences remains to be seen. Similarly, how individuals would respond when the status quo is risky remains open to investigation.

Finally, our results suggest new avenues for future research. Personality is related to regulatory focus (e.g., Ouschan, Boldero, Kashima, Wakimoto, & Kashima, 2007). However, given the results of Study 2 where regulatory focus was situationally induced, it is unlikely that personality had a critical impact on our findings. This has a potentially important implication. Regulatory focus, unlike personality and political ideology, can be situationally induced. Thus, our results suggest ways in which politicians and others might achieve change or maintenance of the status quo through situational framing.

In conclusion, our results, although intuitively reasonable, require confirmation in domains other than the specific one examined in the present studies. Nonetheless, they do suggest that if governments or other institutions, such as businesses, wish their constituents to opt for change rather than maintain the status quo, they should encourage them to use eager rather than vigilant decision-making strategies. Moreover, our results also suggest that one way of increasing the likelihood that individuals will use eager rather than vigilant strategies is to induce a promotion focus and represent current conditions as being poor, perhaps by highlighting their more negative features while emphasizing the opportunities for improvement and advancement from those conditions

through change. Furthermore, if governments or other institutions wish their constituents to maintain what is currently a satisfactory status quo, they should encourage them to use vigilant rather than eager decision-making strategies. One way of increasing the likelihood that individuals will use vigilant strategies is by inducing a prevention focus and representing the current conditions as being satisfactory, perhaps by highlighting their more positive features while emphasizing the necessity for safety and security through maintenance of the status quo. This would increase the likelihood that the party currently in power would maintain its status quo position. Indeed, this does seem to be a technique that some governments use— wittingly or not.

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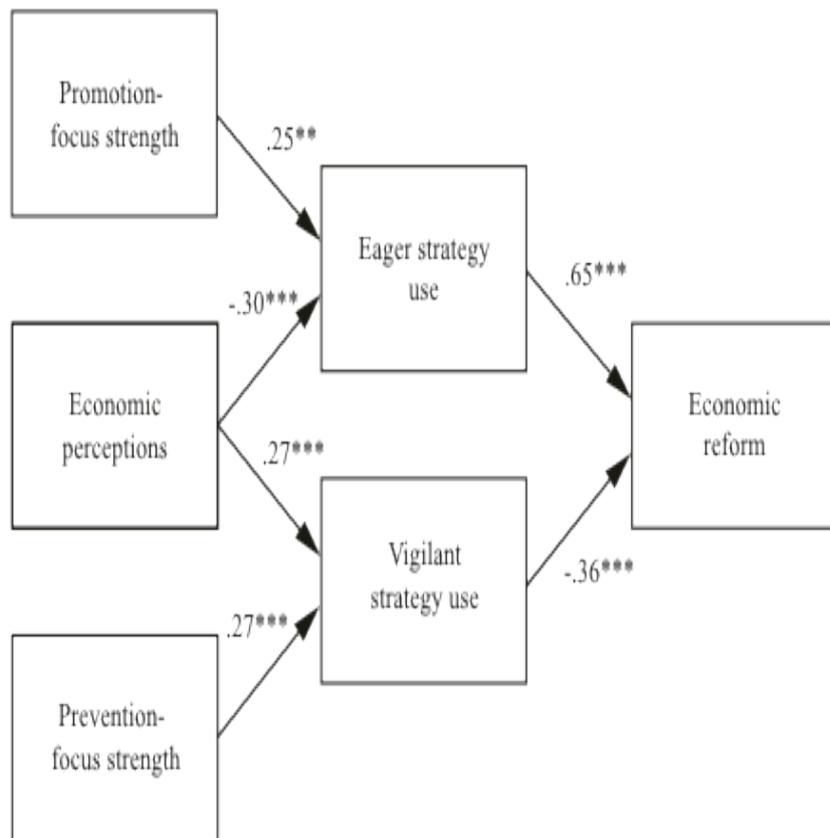
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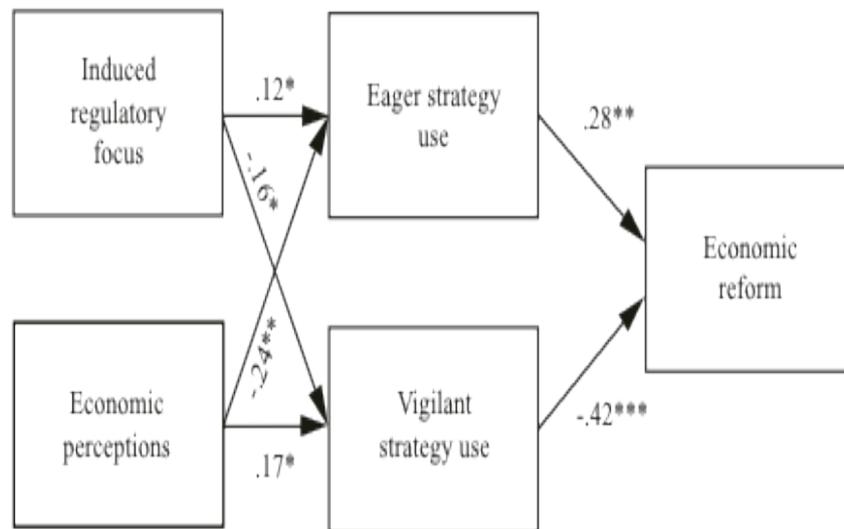
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Note: \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

Figure 1

Structural equation model of the influence of promotion- and prevention-focus strength, economic conditions perceptions, eager and vigilant strategy use on voting for economic reform over the status quo (Study 1).



Note: \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

Figure 2

Structural equation model of induced regulatory focus, economic conditions perceptions, eager and vigilant strategy use on voting for economic reform over the status quo (Study 2).

## Appendix 1

“Average” economic condition report used in Studies 1 and 2.

### THE AUSTRALIAN ECONOMY

#### **Economic growth**

Reported annual growth in real gross domestic product (GDP) rose in the December quarter to 2.1%. The modest GDP outcome underscores the moderate strength of domestic activity. Many other economic indicators point to continued slow momentum in economic growth.

#### **Trade**

Moderate growth in commodity prices combined with modest falls in import prices have boosted Australia’s terms of trade by only 2% over the year to December 31st. Fluctuating terms of trade reflect the moderate purchasing power of domestic income. Real gross domestic income (GDI) expanded by only 1.2%. This is consistent with other economic indicators, such as the slow labor market, limited consumer and business confidence, and moderate investment intentions, all of which reflect moderate expansion. Moreover, the moderate strength of global commodity markets combined with further limited appreciation of the \$A suggests that the terms of trade is unlikely to improve.

#### **Domestic economy**

The domestic economy remains in good shape and although cyclical slowing in domestic demand is expected in the coming year, business investment and household consumption spending should remain solid.

#### **Domestic demand**

The domestic sector was stable in the past year and all the indications are for a continuation this year. The near-term conditions facing the household sector are relatively positive. The economy created

created 150,000 jobs in the past year, although only half of these were in full time employment. The unemployment rate is the higher than that in recent years. Moderate economic growth suggests further employment growth in the coming year. Households have benefited from incomes, due to moderate wage increases and tax cuts. All these conditions are favorable for households and consequently consumer sentiment is currently moderate. The strength of domestic spending in recent years and global economic conditions has created a relatively positive business environment.

#### **Exports**

Like the domestic economy, the trade sector has put in a moderate performance. Net exports have stabilized. For many exporters, recent years have been good. Farm exports are another average performer.

#### **Australia’s world position**

Overall Australia’s economy has been performing at about average levels. Economic growth is moderate and unemployment is relatively stable, although inflation is above the Reserve Bank’s target range. Australians are maintaining moderate wealth. The terms of trade are at average levels and the Aussie dollar is stable. Business and household confidence is moderate. The combination of average-performing exports and rising imports, along with continuing stable employment rates has maintained Australia’s continuing economic position among the middle third of OECD nations.

## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The remaining 40% of participants reported that they voted for one of a number of minority parties that range across the political spectrum.

<sup>2</sup> The “good” and “poor” economic reports are available on request from the first author.

<sup>3</sup> The method Mplus uses for calculating degrees of freedom is given in the Mplus Technical Appendices at [www.statmodel.com](http://www.statmodel.com). Furthermore, the  $\chi^2$  values obtained using categorical dependent variables, as was the case here, cannot be used for  $\chi^2$  difference tests.

<sup>4</sup> As in Study 1, we examined whether including the interaction of induced regulatory focus and economic perceptions led to a model that fit the data. This model did not fit the data using any fit index,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.82, p = .051, TFI = .85, CFI = .89, RMSEA = .105$ .