

THE EFFECT OF CREDIBILITY HEURISTICS ON THE  
POLITICAL DECISIONS OF OLDER ADULTS IN THE  
AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

by

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A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Psychology  
in the Graduate School of  
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2022

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined age differences in the influence of messages from credible religious leaders on political decision-making within the African American community. Participants were exposed to fictitious vignettes in which a credible pastor endorsed the platform of a fictional politician. The platforms presented varied in ease of comprehension, as this has been found to affect the likelihood of using either heuristic or systematic processing in decision-making. After reading over the platform, participants indicated the likelihood that they would vote for the candidate. Consistent with existing literature, the results show that older adults were more likely to use heuristic processing than younger adults. This was illustrated by older participants indicating a higher likelihood of voting for a political candidate than younger adults, even when the candidate's platform was incongruent with their assumed policy views. The results indicate that older adults were more likely than younger adults to rely on the recommendation of the pastor. Results from this study add to the existing literature regarding decision-making in older adults, particularly heuristic processing.

*Keywords:* Heuristics, Older Adults, and Decision-making

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank those of you who have provided support along this journey.

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## INTRODUCTION

Making decisions is a part of everyday life for all individuals, but this is especially true for older adults who have to make decisions about healthcare, retirement, and insurance policies. These decisions can range from simple choices to decisions that could have implications for the remainder of one's life. Decisions about healthcare and insurance policies are often complex in that they require the consideration of multiple attributes across various options. The aforementioned type of complex decisions requires working memory resources (Miyake & Shah, 1999). Unfortunately, research has shown that there are age-related declines in working memory capacity (Myerson et al., 2003) and that this decline can have an adverse effect on decision making (Wayde et al., 2016). Another change that occurs as a function of aging is a change in the willingness to expend cognitive resources. Due to age-related changes in cognitive resources, it is more cumbersome for older adults to engage in deliberative processing than younger adults. Thus, older adults are more selective about allocating their limited resources (Baltes et al., 1999; Hess et al., 2005; Enis, Hess, and Smith, 2013) to cognitively resource-demanding tasks. The reduction in working memory resources and the reluctance to expend cognitive resources can also affect the quality of older adults' decisions. One way to conceptualize the impact of cognitive resources and motivation on decision making is through dual process models such as the Heuristic—Systematic model.

## **Dual Process Model and Decision-Making as a Function of Age**

A number of decision-making models have been proposed that predict the conditions under which people will engage in elaborative processing versus shallow or heuristic processing to make a decision. One such model is the Heuristic-Systematic model, which states that individuals process information by either using heuristic and/or systematic strategies (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994). Systematic processing occurs when the individual actively engages with the information and uses working memory resources to systematically process all of the attributes associated with each of the options (Chaiken, 1980). Heuristic processing involves the use of simple shortcuts or rules of thumb deemed to have a high probability of yielding the “right” answer. Unfortunately, heuristics are not always associated with the “correct” answer. For example, one heuristic is, “experts can be trusted” (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994) and laypersons can make decisions based on their recommendations. Although experts frequently provide better advice in their domain of expertise than novices, one should not always follow the advice of an expert. Another heuristic is that repeated messages are more likely to be true than messages that are not repeated (Roggeveen & Johar, 2002). Although correct messages are probably more likely to be repeated across multiple sources, this is not always the case. Thus, in using heuristics, one is relying on adages that are often true but not always, and one is not considering all options, or all consequences associated with a decision. The shortcuts, associated with heuristics, can lead to erroneous conclusions.

Another dual process model, the Elaborative Likelihood Model (ELM), delineates the conditions under which individuals use heuristics rather than elaborative or systematic cognitive processes. ELM assumes that when individuals are highly motivated and have the requisite cognitive resources, they use the elaborative or systematic route. However, when individuals

have limited working memory resources or are unmotivated, they use the heuristic route. This study examined decision-making processes in older African American adults, a group which has been less represented in this area of research. Specifically, this study sought to examine the conditions under which these older adults would be more likely to use a heuristic for decision-making.

### **Credibility Heuristic**

The current study focuses on one heuristic in particular—the credibility heuristic. The credibility heuristic refers to the finding that people will sometimes forgo systematic analyses and instead base their decision-making on the endorsement of another trustworthy source (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994). In the Black community, one domain in which the credibility heuristic may be highly relevant is the church. The Black Church and Black Pastors have been at the forefront of many civil rights movements that have advanced opportunities for African American people. Thus, many black church goers look to the pastor as a credible source to provide guidance with respect to social policy. This is especially true of older African Americans who grew up during an era in which black pastors such as Martin Luther King were at the forefront of the civil rights movement and were active in changing social policies.

Often prominent black pastors guided the congregation and indicated which politician could be trusted and which of the politicians were most favorable to the black community. Because of age cohort differences in church attendance and perhaps the importance of the black pastor, I am predicting that older African Americans will be more likely to rely on the endorsement of black pastors because of the historic role the black pastor has played in the black community. However, another reason that I believe that black older adults would be more likely to rely on the black pastor than black younger adults is because of the evidence that older adults

are more likely than younger adults to utilize a heuristic when making a decision. As indicated earlier, the extant literature indicates that older adults rely more on heuristics such as credibility than younger adults. However, the extent to which older adults use a heuristic varies as a function of multiple factors. Interestingly, it has been shown that white older adults are more likely to use systematic processing in situations in which they are very invested in the outcome of a decision than in situations in which the outcome of the decision is minimally relevant to their lives. For example, Christensen, Ascione, and Bagozzi (1997), conducted an interesting study in which they varied the extent to which older adults would be invested in the outcome of a decision to determine if level of involvement influenced older adults' likelihood of using systematic processing.

Specifically, Christensen et al. (1997) used the Elaborative Likelihood dual process model to examine when older adults would use systematic processing versus heuristic processing in making purchasing decisions. Participants were presented with a new drug that varied in quality (efficacious drug but dangerous side effects or efficacious drug with minor side effects). They were also presented with endorsers who varied in credibility. In one instance, the endorser was a medical doctor (credible) and in the other instance the endorser was a contractor (less credible). The researchers varied the level of involvement among participants to determine if level of involvement would influence the likelihood that older adults would engage in systematic versus heuristic processing. In the high involvement condition, participants were led to believe that governmental agencies that regulated pharmaceutical advertisement would rely heavily on their feedback before approving the marketing and advertisement of this particular new drug. In the low involvement condition, the participants' opinions would have no bearing on the marketing or advertisement of the drug.

Results showed that when individuals were relying on systematic processing (i.e., high involvement condition), their product ratings were based on the quality of the product and were not influenced by the credibility of the individual who endorsed the product (Christensen et al., 1997). However, when participants relied on heuristic processing (i.e., low involvement condition), product ratings were based on the credibility of the individual endorsing the product. Thus, level of involvement determined the degree to which older adults engaged in deliberative processing, and older participants were more likely to be influenced by credibility when they were less involved rather than more invested in the decision outcome (Christensen et al., 1997). A study conducted more recently also showed that personal involvement determined the extent to which older adults used deliberative processing (Hess et al., 2005). These researchers found that older adults were more influenced by the relevancy of the decision to their own lives than younger adults (Hess et al., 2005). Hess explained age differences by appealing to his theory of selective cognitive engagement.

Hess and colleagues (2005) have used selective engagement theory to explain age differences in decision making across various paradigms. With regard to Selective Engagement theory, Hess et al. (2005) have argued that older adults are capable of using the systematic route to make decisions when motivated to do so, but that older adults are less motivated to use the systematic route than younger adults when the task is not self-relevant to them (Hess et al., 2005). These investigators examined decision making in young and older adults as a function of personal involvement and source likeability. Individuals from 20 to 85 were asked to make attitude judgments about social policies that varied in terms of relevance to their own lives. The researchers also varied the likeability of the source responsible for proposing the policy. In some instances, the proponent of the social policy was likeable and in other instances, the individual

was less likeable (based on pretesting). The researchers were interested in examining the extent to which participants would make attitude judgments congruent with their affective response to the source instead of making judgments congruent with their beliefs. If participants were using a systematic strategy for decision making, they would inhibit source likability and form judgments based solely on the social policy. Hess et al. found that older adults were more influenced by source likeability than younger adults in the low but not high involvement condition (2005). They argued that it is extraordinarily important to assess older adults' motivation level when examining age-related differences in decision-making (2005). Heretofore, there have been several studies that have examined the effects of personal relevance on the decision-making strategies of older adults. However, research specifically examining selective cognitive engagement and cognition among African American older adults has been neglected.

### **Culture, Race, and the Credibility Heuristic**

Often, researchers assume findings from Eurocentric research will be generalizable to African Americans. However, many studies have provided evidence that the trajectory of age-related changes in cognition among whites is not generalizable to other racial groups, because of group differences in culture, education, and health—all of which affect cognition. For example, there is evidence that African American older adults have had less access to high quality education and that this lack of access affects literacy levels, brain development and even knowledge about health. Additionally, research shows that years and quality of education affect working memory capacity, reading comprehension and memory.

Other studies have shown that certain health factors such as diabetes and hypertension impact cognitive functioning (Rexroth et al., 2013; Zelinski, 1998). Unfortunately, the prevalence of diabetes and hypertension is higher for African Americans as compared to non-

Hispanic white Americans (CDC, 2020). Finally, one often overlooked factor influences cognition and the way in which information is interpreted—culture.

Older African Americans have a rich culture that in many ways is distinct from the dominant American culture. For example, spirituality has been an extremely important part of the African American culture. Compared to white Americans, African Americans report higher levels of religious involvement (Chatters et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 1996). This high involvement is often attributed to the distinctive space that the Black Church has held throughout the years. The Black Church has a rich tradition of civic engagement spanning from political involvement to social activism creating social capital and collective resources within the community (Taylor et al., 2004). Historically, African Americans have had limited access to certain civil institutions such as labor unions, used to pursue the interests of their members (Brown, 2009). Bridging the gap, the Black Church has been an active representative in faith-based community organizing imploring representatives and legislators to create policies to protect and improve the quality of life for Black individuals (Brown, 2009).

African American pastors in the Black church have often emphasized the importance of justice and equity, especially with regard to issues such as police brutality. This study uses the personally relevant issue of police brutality to elicit motivation and high involvement in a decision-making problem focused on the use of the credibility heuristic in the Black community. The current study explores the extent to which African American participants will passively rely on the recommendation of the pastor instead of deliberating over the issues related to a decision. I am interested in determining if age differences will be moderated by ease of comprehension. I am predicting that older adults will be more influenced by the pastor's recommendation when information concerning the decision is easy to understand versus conditions in which the

information is difficult to understand. Past research has shown that individuals often use heuristics when they feel overwhelmed or find the information related to the decision difficult to understand.

Because I will be comparing young and old African Americans, it is important to acknowledge differences in the way that African American young and older adults view organized religion and the authority of pastors. Younger adults in general are less likely to attend religious services than previous cohorts (PEW, 2020). Although younger African Americans are more likely to attend church than their white counterparts and report higher levels of religiosity and spirituality than their white counterparts (Chatters et al., 2008), younger African Americans are less likely to attend church than older African Americans. This shift in church attendance and religiosity may affect the extent to which younger African Americans identify with the pastor. Thus, one source of age differences in heuristic usage or reliance on the credibility heuristic might be age differences in the extent that younger African Americans believe an individual to be credible because s(he) is a pastor of a church. Another source of age differences might be age differences in reading comprehension—especially when passages are replete with complex sentences that may be difficult for older adults to comprehend.

### **The Effects of Ease of Comprehension on the Use of Heuristic Processing**

In addition to credibility, the ease of the comprehension of the message has been found to affect the use of heuristic versus systematic processing. When messages are more difficult to understand, heuristic processing is more likely to be used (Lowery, 1998). There are a plethora of studies that indicate that the ability to comprehend dense complex text changes with age (Cohen, 1979; Finucane et al., 2002; Just & Carpenter, 1992; Miller, Stine-Morrow, Kirkorian, & Conroy, 2004; Peters, 2012; Reyna, Nelson, Han, & Dieckmann, 2009). These age-related

changes in comprehension are often attributed to age-related changes in verbal working memory (Lowery, 1998). For example, it is more difficult for older adults than for younger adults to comprehend a syntactically complex message (Kemper, 1986). Specifically, in a study conducted by Beese et al., (2000) older adults exhibited disadvantages when the sentences included relative clauses and when information was not presented in a straightforward way. Moreover, multiple studies have found that older adults were not as adept at using syntactic or semantic constraints to facilitate comprehension when reading passages with complex sentences (Kemper, 1986; Beese et al., 2000). Finally, older adults have more trouble than younger adults in making appropriate inferences and making accurate pronoun assignments across sentences (Light and Capps, 1986).

This study explored the degree to which older adults rely on heuristics more than younger adults when instructed to make a decision about a policy proposal written in syntactically complex prose. If pastors are viewed as a credible source by older adults, and older adults have less motivation and/or working memory resources than younger adults to engage in elaborative analyses, then older adults may be more likely than younger adults to rely on the pastor's recommendation than younger adults.

In the present study, younger and older African American adults were presented with four vignettes. Each vignette first provided the description of a pastor which included information to establish the pastor as a credible source. The pastor endorsed a candidate whose platform was incongruent with the policy views of most African Americans (as determined by pilot testing). The platform presented across critical trials varied in ease of comprehension. Thus, participant's likelihood to vote for a candidate displayed in a fictional political advertisement was assessed using a 2 age (old vs. young), x 2 ease of comprehension (easy vs. difficult) mixed- factorial

design, with age as a between-subjects variable and ease of comprehension manipulated within-subjects.

My first prediction was that there would be age differences in working memory and that age differences in working memory would lead to age differences in the ability to process and fully comprehend syntactically complex text. Specifically, I hypothesized that when presented with syntactically dense text older adults would be more likely to rely on heuristic processing than younger adults. This is because of the research that indicates that older adults have more difficulty comprehending syntactically complex sentences than younger adults and that older adults are less motivated than younger adults to engage in deliberative processing. Thus, older adults should be more likely to vote for the candidate across comprehension conditions in comparison with younger adults. However, I am predicting that age differences will be attenuated in the easy comprehension condition relative to the difficult condition.

I am also predicting that older adults will score higher on the religiosity measure (Duke University Religion Index) than younger adults. In fact, another reason that older adults might be more likely to rely on the pastor's recommendation than younger adults is that older adults might be more religious than young adults (PEW, 2020). If that is true, they may value the pastor's recommendations to a greater extent than younger adults. I will be able to check the aforementioned assumptions via manipulation checks included in the study. There is a manipulation check to assess the credibility of the pastor and there's a manipulation check to assess the difficulty of the passages.

I am predicting that younger adults will be more likely to engage in systematic processing than older adults. One of the strong points of my study is that it is designed in such a way that I am able to make inferences about systematic vs. heuristic decision making. Systematic route

processing would be evidenced by participants being more likely to vote for the candidate, regardless of the endorsement of the pastor. Keep in mind that in the critical condition, the political candidate will promote views that are inconsistent with the views of most African American adults. Heuristic route processing will be evidenced by older adults indicating a higher likelihood than younger adults to vote for the candidate despite the incongruity between the views expressed in the platform and their own value system. However, if older adults are very invested in police brutality, they might behave as the participants in the Hess et al. (2005) study and use the systematic route despite age differences in working memory.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

Older adults were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTURK) and from the community while younger adults were currently enrolled in an intro to psychology course and received partial course credit for participation. All participants self-identified as Black or African American. There were 181 participants who completed the experiment. Data from three younger participants were excluded due to incompleteness of all surveys. Data from seven older participants was excluded due to failure of attention checks. Older participants completed an adapted version of the Short Portable Mental Status Health Questionnaire (SPMHQ), a dementia screening instrument. Older adults who obtained scores below the cutoff for a diagnosis of dementia were not included in the analysis.

There was a final total sample size 171 participants, 88 younger adults and 83 older adults. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 78 (Younger adults  $M=18$ , Older adults  $M=61$ ). Educational level was captured using a scale ranging from 1=some high school, no degree to 9=doctorate degree. Based on prescreen data collected younger adults had slightly less education ( $M= 3.00$ , indicating some college) than older adults ( $M= 5.75$  indicative of an Associate's Degree). There were no significant age differences in educational levels.

The G\*Power program (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) was used to ascertain the appropriate sample size to reach .80 power. I performed the calculation using a small effect size ( $f=.25$ ) and with a 2 x2 mixed factor design. The G\*Power program indicated that 158 participants were needed (74 young and old).

## Measures

All measures were self-paced and completed online via MTURK. Older participants completed an adapted version of the Short Portable Mental Status Health Questionnaire (SPMHQ). The SPMHQ is an instrument used to detect cognitive impairment in older populations. This screening instrument has a maximum score of ten. Normal mental functioning is evidenced by zero to two errors. Three to four errors are indicative of mild cognitive impairment; five to seven errors suggest moderate cognitive impairment, while eight or more errors suggests severe cognitive impairment. The SPMHQ does account for variability related to educational attainment. One or more errors is allowed if the individual has a grade school education or lower; however, one less error is allowed if the individual has education above the high school level. The data from older participants who have three or more errors on the SPMHQ were not included in the final analysis. The SPMHQ is a reliable and valid measure with .74 and .91 sensitivity and specificity, respectively.

To assess how religiosity and spirituality affect the degree to which participants rely on the recommendation of pastors, participants completed the Duke University Religion Index (DUREL) and the Spirituality Scale (SS). The DUREL is a measure of religious involvement that assesses three major dimensions of religiosity: organizational religious activity, non-organizational religious activity, and intrinsic religiosity (or subjective religiosity). The DUREL has high test-retest reliability of .91 and high convergent validity with other measures of religiosity (Koenig, Parkerson, & Meador, 1997). The SS measures the beliefs, institutions, lifestyle choices, practices, and rituals, representative of the human spiritual dimension (Delaney, 2005). The SS shows to be a reliable measure with test-retest of .84 (Delaney, 2005).

Finally, participants completed an operations span task, a measure of working memory. In this task individuals must solve a series of arithmetic problems while remembering a list of unrelated words. They were instructed at the beginning of the operation span task to remember the word presented with the arithmetic problem. Participants were presented with one equation and word at a time. They indicated whether the arithmetic problem was calculated correctly by selecting true, if the problem was calculated incorrectly the participant selected false. The number of problems varied in each series; six, four, and three problems respectively. Each span was self-paced. At the end of each series the participant was prompted to recall the order of the words presented. This task was used to determine if working memory capacity interacts with reading complexity in determining the degree to which participants rely on a heuristic (e.g., pastor credibility). Working memory span was determined by the highest number of words the participant was able to order correctly.

### **Vignettes**

Participants received four decision-making trials. Each decision-making trial consisted of a vignette ranging from two to three paragraphs in length. The vignettes began by describing the characteristics of the pastor. Based on the pilot data, the pastor was perceived as a credible source. Establishing the pastor as a credible source was vital to the use of the dual process model. After the introduction of the pastor, the vignette continued with the pastor's introduction of a political candidate for office followed by the pastor's official endorsement of the candidate. Next, participants received an excerpt from a speech in which the candidate described his platform. The two critical trials varied in ease of comprehension, both platforms were incongruent with the views of most African Americans. These trials focused on character flaws of the criminal and the necessity of current police tactics despite claims of brutality and

unwarranted deaths. Higher ratings of likelihood to vote for the candidate would evidence heuristic processing despite incongruency of the platform with the participants beliefs. Systematic processing would be determined by the participant dismissing the endorsement of the pastor and choosing not to vote for the candidate.

Two of the four trials served as non-critical filler trials used to disguise the true intent of the study. The filler trials consisted of vignettes that depicted a pastor who was rated average in credibility and trustworthiness. These vignettes also varied in ease of comprehension; however, the non-critical trials espoused views deemed to be congruent with the viewpoints of most African Americans. These trials focused on policy reform and demilitarization of the police.

As previously mentioned, the reading level varied (easy vs. difficult) across each politician's platform. The Flesch-Kincaid scale was used to assess reading scale. In the easy to comprehend conditions the platform presented was assessed to be at a 5<sup>th</sup> grade reading level per the Flesch-Kincaid scale. In the difficult to understand condition the platform was assessed to be at a 12<sup>th</sup> grade level. Ease of comprehension was manipulated within subjects therefore each participant received all comprehension conditions.

## **Procedure**

This study was conducted online via Qualtrics. Participants recruited via MTURK accessed the Qualtrics study link through the MTURK platform. Participants first provided informed consent and completed demographic information. Participants were then given instructions for completing the study. All questionnaires were self-paced. Participants received four trials. On a given trial, participants received the following: a vignette in which a credible pastor endorsed a politician, a vignette in which participants were presented with an excerpt of the politician's speech on police brutality, and finally participants were presented with a

questionnaire in which they indicate the likelihood of voting for a politician. Each of these components of a trial will be discussed in more detail below.

During the first component of a trial, participants received a vignette describing a credible pastor, based on feedback from the pilot study. Once the participant finished reading the vignette, they clicked an arrow on the bottom of the screen to move to the rating scales. Upon receiving the rating scales, participants indicated the likelihood that they would vote for the candidate endorsed by the pastor. They also provided ratings about their perception of the credibility of the pastor. Lastly, participants rated the ease of comprehension of the vignette. Participants completed the aforementioned sequence for each of the four trials. Following the completion of all questions related to the vignettes participants completed the DUREL, the Spirituality Survey, the Operation Span Task, and the WAIS Vocabulary subscale. Additionally, older participants completed the SPMHQ. The participants were then debriefed and compensated for their participation.

## RESULTS

In conducting this study, my goal was to examine age difference in the use of the credibility heuristic. Because issues such as credibility and ease of comprehension can be somewhat subjective, I wanted to conduct a pilot study to receive feedback about the stimuli chosen for this study. The pilot study was conducted via MTURK and included 15 participants ranging in age from 55-67. The pilot study participants' mean credibility rating on a 5-point scale was ( $M=2.91$ ). With lower scores indicating higher credibility, the participants viewed the pastor as moderately credible. In addition to credibility, ease of comprehension was assessed during the pilot study. For the initial pilot study, the difficult to comprehend vignettes were assessed to be at a 10<sup>th</sup> grade reading level per the Flesch-Kincaid reading scale. The ratings were assessed on a 5-point scale with the mean rating of ( $M=4$ ) for difficulty of comprehension. This rating indicates that participants did not find the vignette to be very difficult to comprehend. Thus, to make sure that the two comprehension conditions were significantly different in terms of reading ease, the vignette in the more difficult to comprehend condition was modified. For the critical study, the passage was written at a 12<sup>th</sup> grade reading level per the Flesch-Kincaid reading scale.

### **Main Study**

For the main study my primary hypotheses were as follows: older adults would be more likely to rely on the credibility heuristic than younger adults and that these age differences would be moderated by the ease of comprehension of the politician's speech. I will address each of these predictions in turn.

## Age differences as a function of ease of comprehension

My main dependent variable was the likelihood of voting for the candidate. Recall that the “political candidate” espoused views which were inconsistent with the views of most African Americans. It was assumed that if the candidate was making decisions based solely on the merits of the candidate that the participants would choose not to vote for the candidate. The participants rated their likelihood to vote for the candidate on a 5-point scale. Lower scores indicate greater likelihood to vote for the candidate.

**Table 1**

*Mean Probability of Voting for Political Candidate as a Function of Age and Ease of Comprehension.*

Comprehension Condition	Age	
	Younger	Older
Easy Comprehension	4.01( <i>SD</i> =1.30)	2.88( <i>SD</i> =1.38)
Hard Comprehension	3.39( <i>SD</i> =3.39)	2.76( <i>SD</i> =1.31)

*Note.* Data for critical trials only.

Table 1 depicts the data for younger and older adults as a function of reading comprehension for the critical trials (i.e., the incongruent condition). There are several important points to note from Table 1. First, younger adults were less likely to vote for the candidate than older adults across reading comprehension conditions. Secondly, older adults’ likelihood of voting for the candidate was influenced by ease of comprehension.

The above observations were supported by a 2 Age (Young vs. Old) x 2 Reading Comprehension (Hard vs. Difficult) ANOVA. The ANOVA yielded a significant main effect of Age, in that  $F(1,169) = 25.969, p < .001$  older adults were more likely to vote for the candidate

( $M = 2.819$ ) than younger adults ( $M = 3.699$ ). The analysis yielded a main effect of ease of comprehension,  $F(1, 169) = 14.357, p < .001$  in that participants were more likely to vote for the candidate in the difficult comprehension condition ( $M = 3.073$ ) than in the easy condition ( $M = 4.445$ ). Importantly, the ANOVA also yielded an interaction between the Ease of Comprehension condition and Age, ( $F(1, 169) = 6.576, p = .011$ ) such that younger participants were more influenced by ease of comprehension than older adults. For younger adults, in the difficult condition ( $M = 3.39$ ), the mean likelihood of voting for the candidate was significantly greater than the mean likelihood of voting for the candidate in the easy condition ( $M = 4.01$ ). On the other hand, for older adults, there was a relatively small difference between the easy ( $M = 2.88$ ) and difficult conditions ( $M = 2.76$ ).

I also presented participants with non-critical filler trials. With regard to the filler trials, the platform messaging was targeted to be congruent with the viewpoints of most African Americans; however, ease of comprehension varied. Table 2 shows the data for the noncritical trials as a function of Age and Ease of Comprehension. There are several points to note. First, both young and older adults were more likely to vote for the candidate in the easy comprehension than the difficult condition. Younger adults were more influenced by ease of comprehension than older adults.

The above observations were supported by a 2Age (Young vs. Old) x 2 Comprehension (Easy vs. Hard) ANOVA. The ANOVA yielded a significant main effect of ease of comprehension ( $F(1, 169) = 16.475, p < .001$ ). Across age groups participants were more likely to vote for the candidate when the platform was easier to comprehend ( $M = 1.94$ ) as compared to when the platform was more difficult to understand ( $M = 2.29$ ). Although younger adults were more influenced by ease of comprehension than older adults, the age differences were not

significant in the overall analyses. That is, there was not a significant main effect of age when messaging was congruent.

**Table 2**

*Probability of Voting for Political Candidate as a Function of Age and Ease of Comprehension.*

Comprehension Condition	Age	
	Younger	Older
Easy Comprehension	1.80( <i>SD</i> =.90)	2.08( <i>SD</i> =.97)
Hard Comprehension	2.28( <i>SD</i> =1.10)	2.30( <i>SD</i> =1.07)

*Note.* Data for non-critical trials only

However, I followed up on the observation that younger adults altered their voting responses as a function of ease of comprehension when completing the noncritical trials. Table 2 shows that there are virtually no age differences in the difficult comprehension condition with regard to the noncritical trials. However, there appear to be age differences in the easy comprehension condition. An independent samples t-test was performed to determine differences in likelihood to vote for the candidate in the noncritical easy to comprehend condition. Results show there was a significant age difference in voting behavior  $t(169)=2.026, p=.044$ , because younger adults were more likely to vote for the candidate than older adults.

Based on the voting responses, it appears that older adults were definitely more influenced by the endorsement of the pastor than younger adults. However, although older adults were more likely to rely on the recommendation of the pastor than younger adults, older adults did change their responses based on the extent to which the candidate’s belief was consistent with their own. Thus, although the pastor endorsed the political candidate in the

congruent and incongruent conditions, the older adult was more likely to vote for the candidate in the congruent condition ( $M = 2.19$ ) than in the incongruent condition ( $M = 2.82$ ). Thus, the actual platform did influence their decision.

It was also predicted that working memory would mediate the relation between age and voting behavior. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), for there to be an indirect effect or mediation between two variables, the independent variable (Age) has to significantly predict the mediator (Working Memory). In this study, Age was not a significant predictor of working memory,  $b = .29$ ,  $t(171) = 1.05$ ,  $p = .30$ . This result was not predicted as previous research has shown an age-related decline in working memory.

Finally, I predicted that spirituality and religiosity would moderate the strength of the Age effect on voting behavior. To determine if religiosity determined the strength of the Age effect, I conducted a hierarchical analysis in which the independent variable-Age was entered in the first step and the interaction term Age and Religiosity was entered in the second step. The interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 171) = 2.2$ ,  $p = .138$ ,  $b = .05$ ,  $t(171) = 1.49$ ,  $p = .138$ . To determine if there was significant moderation of the age effect by spirituality, I conducted a hierarchical analysis in which the independent variable-Age was entered in the first step and the interaction term Age and Spirituality was entered in the second step. The interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 171) = 1.2$ ,  $p = .279$ ,  $b = .05$ ,  $t(171) = 1.09$ ,  $p = .279$ . Although the moderation analyses was not significant, I was also interested in exploring specific aspects of religiosity. I included questions within my survey that focused on issues such as church attendance, frequency of prayer and Bible Study. Extant research has indicated that older African Americans attend church services more frequently than younger African Americans. This study yielded a pattern of data consistent with extant research.

**Table 3***Correlations among spirituality, religiosity, voting behavior and Age.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Age	—	-.325**	0.080	0.077	.508**	.185*	.183*
Likelihood to Vote for Candidate	-.335**	—	0.066	-.183*	-.331	-.270**	-.179*
Working Memory	0.080	0.066	—	-0.120	0.111	-.050	-.027
Religiosity	0.077	-.183*	-0.120	—	.206**	.783**	.758**
Spirituality	.508**	-.331**	0.111	.206**	—	.283**	.222**
Church Attendance	.185*	-.270**	-0.050	.783**	.283**	—	.547**
Participation in Church Activities	.183*	-.179*	-0.027	.758**	.222**	.547**	—

Note. \*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 presents a correlation matrix that shows the intercorrelation between Age, Religiosity, Spirituality, and Church Attendance. Note that there are significant correlations among the variables Age, Spirituality, and church attendance. Church attendance was captured on a 5-point scale, with one indicating never have attended church and 6 indicating attendance more than once a week. Younger adults reported ( $M= 3.69$ ) attending church an average of a few times a year whereas older adults ( $M= 4.20$ ) reported attending church on average a few times a month. An independent samples t-test revealed a significant age differences in church attendance  $t(169)=2.452, p=.008$ . An independent sample t-test also revealed a significant age difference in participation in religious activities such as prayer, meditation, or Bible study  $t(169)=2.422, p=.017$ . Questions about church attendance were included because it may influence the extent to which participants revere pastors of a church.

Finally, I also included manipulation checks in my study to determine if actual participants in the primary study found the pastor to be credible and whether participants found the reading material easier to comprehend in the easy comprehension condition than in the difficult reading condition. With regard to credibility, the younger adult's credibility rating ( $M=2.77$ ) was slightly higher than the credibility rating of older adults ( $M= 2.51$ ). Results from an independent sample t-test determined there were no significant difference in credibility ratings between the two groups  $t(169)=1.618, p=.108$ . Thus, both young and old participants found the pastor in the critical trials to be moderately credible. To determine if there were significant age differences in the ease of comprehension ratings for both young and older adults an additional t-test was conducted. Results revealed no significant difference in ease of comprehension rating  $t(169)=.097, p=.923$  These results indicate both age groups viewed the ease of comprehension and credibility of the pastor similarly.

## DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to determine if there were age differences among younger and older African American adults with respect to the credibility heuristic. What makes this study unique is that credibility was evaluated using a figure that has been central to the Civil Rights movement—the African American Pastor. The extant literature indicates that older adults are more likely to use heuristics than younger adults due to age differences in motivation and due to age-related changes in working memory. One cognitive task that is associated with working memory resources is reading comprehension—especially when passages are replete with syntactic complexity. In the current study, participants were presented with a Pastor who was viewed as moderately credible or trustworthy who recommended a political candidate be elected to public office. The political candidate’s views on police brutality were inconsistent with the views of most African American voters (Buckler and Unnever, 2008; Weitzer and Tuch, 2004). If participants relied on the recommendation of the pastor even when the political candidate espoused views which were incongruent with their own, then participants would be relying on heuristics rather than deliberative processing. Alternatively, if the participants rejected the recommendation of the pastor when the political candidate expressed views inconsistent with their own views, then I assumed that participants were engaged in deliberative processing. I predicted that older adults would be more likely than younger adults to rely on the Pastor’s recommendation even when the political candidate endorsed views incongruent with the participant’s views. In order to test this hypothesis, I varied the extent to which a vignette was easy versus difficult to read. Based on the past literature, I predicted that older adults would be

more likely than younger adults to rely on the heuristic when a passage was difficult to read in comparison with when a passage was fairly easy to read. My results were different from my predictions. It was the younger adults rather than the older adults who shifted their voting behavior based on ease of comprehension.

It was also hypothesized that there might be age differences in the extent to which younger and older adults relied on the credibility heuristic because of age differences in religiosity. The DUREL and the Spirituality Scale were administered to explore this possibility. I found that that neither religiosity as measured by the DUREL or spirituality moderated the strength of the age effect. In fact, there were no significant age differences in religiosity although older adults reported higher levels of spirituality than younger adults. However, there were significant age differences in specific aspects of religiosity and spirituality. Namely, older adults attended church more frequently and engaged in more religious activities such as Bible Study and praying. Each of my hypotheses will be discussed in more depth below.

One of the primary surprises in my analyses of the data was the lack of age differences in working memory, given the plethora of studies finding age differences (Dobbs and Rule, 1989; Morris et al., 1987). One possible explanation for the lack of age difference is that the older adults in our study were better educated than the typical older adult. In the general population, older adults as a whole are less educated than younger adults (Bialik & Fry, 2019). In this study, there was not a significant difference between the younger and older adults in terms of education, and although it is now common for younger adults to pursue college it was not common for earlier cohorts. In fact, there is evidence that age differences are attenuated when young and older adults are equated for educational level (Fournet et al., 2012). A second possibility is the task in the current study may not be as difficult as in person working memory tasks in which the

participant has to recall the target words in the correct order and no cues are provided. In the current study, participants had target words provided but had to remember the order in which the words were presented. Thus, it was difficult to ascertain why the current study did not yield age differences.

Although there were no age differences in working memory, there was an interaction between the Age and Reading Comprehension conditions with respect to the likelihood to vote for the candidate measure. In the critical condition, younger adults' voting responses were more influenced by reading comprehension than older adults. Based on my operationalization of systematic versus heuristic processing, I assume that younger adults were more likely to use the systematic route in the easy to comprehend condition than in the difficult to comprehend condition. As predicted, older adults were more likely to rely on the credibility heuristic in the critical trials than younger adults in that they were more likely than younger adults to vote for a candidate whose views were incongruent with the views of most African Americans. Ease of comprehension did not moderate older adults' voting behavior. Although it was predicted that overall older adults would be more likely to vote for the political candidate in the incongruent condition than younger adults, it was not predicted that older adults would be less influenced by ease of comprehension than younger adults. On the surface, regardless of ease of comprehension, it appeared that older adults were less likely than younger adults to critically analyze the positions outlined in the politician's platform.

I also examined the noncritical trials in which all of the vignettes by the political candidates expressed views which were consistent with the views of the majority of African Americans. As with the critical trials, there was a main effect of ease of comprehension in that all individuals were more likely to vote for the candidate whose views aligned with their own in

the easy comprehension than in the difficult comprehension conditions. Although there was not a main effect of age, there was evidence that younger adults were more influenced by ease of comprehension than older adults. In this study it does not appear that the age effects in decision making were a result of age-related declines in working memory, or age-related declines in reading comprehension.

Although age-related changes in cognitive resources might result in older adults relying on heuristics rather than systematic processing, another reason that age differences might emerge from this study is differences in religiosity across the two cohorts. There is evidence that older African American adults attend church services more consistently than younger African Americans. Moreover, older adults engage in more religious activities than younger adults. Individuals who are members of a church and attend services regularly might revere pastors more than individuals who do not. However, neither the measure of religiosity or the measure of spirituality moderated the age effect with regard to the voting responses in this study.

One other possibility for the age effect in this study is the Cognitive Engagement Theory. Individuals engaged in systematic processing must expend valuable resources in order to actively deliberate on all aspects of a decision. The decision to expend these resources is often based on motivation or involvement. With age there is a reduction of working memory capacity; therefore, older adults are more selective about engaging in effortful processing (Hess, 2014). If older adults are not motivated to engage in systematic processing, the lack of cognitive engagement might be manifested in a greater willingness to rely on the pastor's endorsement instead of actually carefully analyzing the content of the material. In this study older adults may not have been motivated to engage in deliberative processing when presented with the politician's vignette. They appeared to rely on the endorsement of the pastor.

Another issue that needs to be considered in explaining age differences in this study is that police brutality might be an issue that is more important to younger adults than to older adults. Because of age differences in the desire for police reform, older adults might not be as invested in the task as young adults. There have been many national protests and calls for policy change with younger adults at the forefront of the call for action. With the heavier involvement of younger adults in the police reform movement, motivation to engage with the material could have been higher for younger adults, as compared to older adults. This could have the potential to promote systematic thinking in the easy comprehension incongruent condition for younger adults. However, older adults might not be as invested and therefore older adults might not have expended the same level of cognitive resources as younger adults.

It could also be the case that older adults have more conservative views about the role of police and police brutality. That is, they are more accepting of controversial police tactics such as choke holds. However, the data from the congruent condition indicates that older adults in this study had similar views to younger adults. If my results in the critical condition were solely due to age differences in social policy beliefs about police reform, I would not have expected the shift among older adults in the likelihood of voting for the candidate in the congruent vs. the incongruent conditions.

A third possibility that needs to be considered is that older adults have a positivity bias with regards to evaluations and surveys. That is, older adults might be more positive than younger adults and as a result older adults rated the candidates more positively than younger adults across ease of comprehension conditions in the critical trials. However, if older adults were just prone to be more positive when giving their opinion, the positivity bias should be reflected in the noncritical trials. There were no significant age differences in the voting

responses in the congruent noncritical condition. If anything, young adults rated the candidate more favorably than older adults. Thus, the most likely explanation is that older adults were more likely to rely on the endorsement of the pastor than younger adults, probably because of selective engagement.

In conclusion, this study was conducted to explore the effects of the credibility heuristic on decision-making within the African American community. Based on the results, it can be concluded that older adults relied more heavily on the credibility heuristic than younger adults. This finding of greater reliance on the credibility has important implications with regard to older adults and decision-making. An older adult might consider a source credible even when the source is exploiting the older adults or providing misinformation. This should be explored in the future focusing on African American older adults. One reason that it is important to conduct research focusing on African American older adults is the racial difference in access to health and education. Health, education, and exposure to discrimination affect cognition. Taking into account the health conditions that disproportionately affect the Black community such as diabetes and hypertension older African American adults may be more likely to use heuristics than white older adults, even when highly invested in a decision outcome due to health-related reductions in working memory. Therefore, future studies should aim to account for such differences.

Although I believe that this study provides important information about decision making among African American young and older adults, there were several limitations. The sample of this study was not diverse in terms of range of education. The younger adults were all university students and the older adults averaged an associate degree. Due to the lack of educational variation in the study we were not able to accurately capture the moderating effect of education. This could be explored in future research. Another limitation was that there was not a question

that asked participants about their views on police brutality. Finally, there was not a condition in which participants did not receive an endorsement by the pastor. In the future, researchers should include a baseline condition to determine the extent to which an endorsement by a pastor influences future decisions.

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## APPENDIX A

### IRB APPROVAL LETTER



February 24, 2022

Teaira Evans  
Department of Psychology  
College of Arts & Sciences  
The University of Alabama  
Box 870348

Re: IRB # 20-09-3937-R1 "The Effect of Credibility Heuristics on the Political Decisions of Older Adults in the African American Community"

Dear Ms. Evans:

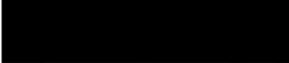
The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your renewal application. You have also been granted the requested waiver of documentation of informed consent. Your renewal application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

*(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.*

The approval for your application will lapse on February 23, 2023. If your research will continue beyond this date, please submit a continuing review to the IRB as required by University policy before the lapse. Please note, any modifications made in research design, methodology, or procedures must be submitted to and approved by the IRB before implementation. Please submit a final report form when the study is complete.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



Carpantato T. Myles, MSM, CIM, CIP  
Director & Research Compliance Officer

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT

---

**Informed Consent**

**Please read this informed consent carefully before deciding to participate in the study**

**Key Information:**

- Participate in a 2-hour study on political decisions
- Take 4 assessments and complete 2 questionnaires
- All data will be confidential. There will be no personally identifiable information related to responses
- You must be at least 18 years old to participate
- You must identify as African-American to participate

**Purpose of the research study:** The purpose of this study is to understand how people make political decisions.

**What will you do in the study:** What will you do in the study: As a participant you will read through four vignettes. It is your job to decide whether you would vote for the candidate described in each vignette. You will also answer questions related to the information presented in the vignettes. After the vignettes you will complete several tasks assessing memory, vocabulary, and religiosity.

**Time required:** The study will require 2 hours of your time.

**Risks:** There are no anticipated risks outside of mild boredom or frustration while completing the tasks.

**Benefits:** There are no direct benefits to participants. However, some participants might find reading about different political candidates entertaining. Some may find the platforms mentally stimulating and intriguing. Evidence from this study will be used to further advance the field of psychology specifically providing data concerning African Americans.

**Confidentiality/Anonymity:** To ensure the validity and integrity of research data each participant's responses will be kept confidential. There will be no identifiers collected that will connect responses to an individual participant. Prior to submitting the study you will have the opportunity to withdraw your data/exit the survey. Please note that you can voluntarily stop the study at any time during the process but if you complete the study in its entirety and give your consent to your data being used in this study there will be no way to later withdraw your data from being used.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this study is completely voluntary.

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB  
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: \_\_\_\_\_  
EXPIRATION DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

**Right to withdraw from the study:** You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Please be aware that withdrawal from the study disqualifies you from receiving payment or course credit.

**How to withdraw from the study:** You may withdraw from the study by discontinuing it and not completing the uncompleted sections. However, if you complete all sections of the experiment then you will not be able to withdraw.

**Compensation/Reimbursement:** Students completing the study through the Subject Pool will receive 2 hours towards their research requirement. Older adults completing the study will receive \$3.50 in the form of a gift certificate.

**Using data beyond this study:** Data may be uploaded to a research database that will be available to other researchers, but there will be no identifying information in the data.

**If you have questions about the study or need to report a study related issue, please contact:**

Name of Principal Investigator: Teairra Z. Evans  
Title: Doctoral Student  
Department Name: Psychology  
Email address: [tzevans@crimson.ua.edu](mailto:tzevans@crimson.ua.edu)

Faculty Advisor's Name: Dr. Shelia Black  
Department Name: Psychology  
Email address: [sblack@ua.edu](mailto:sblack@ua.edu)  
Phone: 205-348-5083

**If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research study, would like to make suggestions or comments about the study, please contact:**

Ms. Tanta Myles, the University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer at (205)-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066. You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach Website at <http://ovpred.ua.edu/research-compliance/prco/>. You may email the Office for Research Compliance at [rscompliance@research.ua.edu](mailto:rscompliance@research.ua.edu).

**Agreement:**

I agree to participate in the research study described above.

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB  
CONSENT FORM APPROVED  
EXPIRATION DATE: *2/24/22*

Project Title: Political Decision-Making

I do not agree to participate in the research study described above.

**Your completion of the study will verify your consent to participate in the study. Click continue to participate.**

**Continue**