Author's response to reviews

Title: Government and charity funding of cancer research: public preferences and choices

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Responses to reviewers’ comments

Reviewer 1: Sarah Smith

Comment: I am confused about the authors’ findings on ordering effects. The previous version said there were ordering effects, in this version there are apparently none. To confirm no ordering effects, the authors should show that the estimated effects of the treatments (from the random effects model) are the same irrespective of the ordering. At the moment, the test is unclear. At one point, they appear just to add a single binary indicator for the alternative ordering.

Response: Our initial analysis of ordering effects did not examine the impact of scenario ordering on the actual allocations to cancer research charities – we simply looked at whether there was an association between ordering and the propensity to choose the same allocations in scenarios 2 and 5 (using the chi-squared test). We found that there was an association: respondents who were presented with scenario 5 prior to scenarios 3 and 4 were more likely to choose the same allocation in scenarios 2 and 5 than those who were presented with scenario 5 last.

However, in view of the previous set of reviewer comments we acknowledged that this was a rather incomplete examination of ordering effects. Instead, we included a dummy variable for ordering in the random effects model. A statistically significant coefficient for this dummy would indicate that ordering was a driver of respondents’ overall allocation choices. But adding this dummy did not improve model fit and its coefficient was not statistically significant. Hence our conclusion that: “The order in which the scenarios were presented was not found to affect respondents’ overall allocations.”

We also split the sample into two sub-samples – one for each ordering – and ran the best-fitting model on the data for each sub-sample separately. The model results show that the signs and relative magnitudes of the coefficients for the treatment effects/scenarios are similar for both sub-samples. We have extended Table 4 to present the results of these additional analyses.

We have also since examined the descriptive statistics and can confirm that the relative magnitudes of the mean allocations to cancer research charities are the same regardless of the scenario ordering – that is, whichever ordering respondents were randomised to, the mean allocations to cancer were always largest in S3, followed by S4, S2, S5 and S1. Hence we are confident in our claim that order in which the scenarios were presented did not affect respondents’ overall allocations.

Comment: The hypothecation scenario is unrealistic since the choice is only for medical research charities. Arguably, the framing of the scenario may encourage respondents to compensate charities for other cuts in public funding by narrowly focusing on one set of charities. It also doesn’t capture the effect of public funding pressures (discussed in the introduction) in a realistic way: The government is unlikely to consider tax hypothecation – which is costly – at the same time as public funding cuts. The conclusion on how much charities would benefit from the combination of public funding cuts and tax hypothecation is therefore implausible and should be removed.

Response: OK – we have dropped this point from our main conclusions.
Comment: *I think the strongest conclusion from the research is that individual donation decisions are largely unrelated to public funding – partly because of the importance of very personal motives linked to experiences of cancer. This seems a more robust and generalizable finding than the results on the effects of (an unrealistic form of) tax hypothecation.*

Response: OK – we have added this point to our main conclusions.

Comment: *The paper is quite long and could do with being shorter and more focused.*

Response: This is a fair comment, though we would point out that the previous round of reviewer comments called for additional text and analyses. We have cut approximately 250 words from the manuscript and will consider cutting more if the editor deems it necessary.