

# **Let Me Think About It: Evidence of Choice Deprivation, Not Overload, in Charitable Giving**

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**Atiyeh Yeganloo, Cahal Moran, Juvaria Jafri**

This study explores how the number of charitable options and the ability to donate to multiple causes affect donor behaviour. While previous research in consumer psychology has warned about “choice overload”, the idea that too many options can overwhelm people, this study finds the opposite effect in charitable giving. Instead of being paralysed by too many choices, donors seem more affected by “choice deprivation,” where too few options limit their ability to give meaningfully.

We conducted a large, scale online study with 2,398 UK participants who were each given real money (£2.50) to donate across two rounds. Participants were shown different sets of charities, either a small number (five) or a large number (forty), and in some cases, were allowed to donate to only one charity, while others could support multiple. The study measured how much participants gave, and how they felt about their choices, using satisfaction and regret as indicators of donor well-being.

The findings reveal that expanding the number of available charities slightly increased overall donations. Participants who had more choices donated more on average, suggesting that a wider selection helped them find causes that resonated with their values. Additionally, those who could donate to multiple charities gave significantly more than those restricted to just one. Rather than becoming confused or overwhelmed, these donors were more engaged and generous when they had greater flexibility.



Importantly, more choice also led to higher satisfaction with the donation decision. Donors appreciated having a broader set of options and reported feeling more content with their choices. Interestingly, although having more choices increased feelings of regret, possibly because donors were more aware of the options they didn't choose, this regret did not reduce donations.

Another part of the study tested whether simplifying the decision process, by pre-selecting a "default" charity, would help donors avoid overload. However, the default option did not lead to increased giving and slightly reduced donation amounts, suggesting that nudges of this kind may backfire in contexts where personal alignment with a cause is important. We further tested whether a greater number of charitable options signals the perceived importance of a cause. The results showed no significant shift in donor category selection, indicating that expanded options influence giving primarily through changes in choice environment rather than signalling urgency or importance.

This study contributes to both the academic literature and practical understanding of charitable giving by challenging the widely held assumption that too many choices lead to decision fatigue or reduced engagement. By carefully separating the effects of having more options from the effects of being allowed to choose multiple recipients, the researchers provide clear evidence that donors benefit from increased choice, both in how much they give and how satisfied they feel with their decisions. Methodologically, the study stands out for its large sample size, real financial stakes, and comprehensive measurement of behavioural and psychological outcomes, including satisfaction, regret, and cognitive engagement. Conceptually, it advances the idea of choice deprivation as a more relevant concern than choice overload in prosocial contexts. This has important implications for how charitable platforms and policymakers design donation experiences, suggesting that expanding options and empowering donor agency can boost both generosity and donor well-being.

Although our study examines charitable giving, the insights are directly relevant to energy and climate policy. Many pro-environmental initiatives, such as green energy tariffs, carbon offset schemes, and climate-focused charities, rely on voluntary contributions and individual adoption. Our results suggest that offering people a wider range of options, or the flexibility to support multiple programmes, can increase engagement and contributions without reducing satisfaction. This highlights a practical design principle for consumer-facing climate interventions: more choice can enhance, rather than hinder, participation.

The overall conclusion is that providing donors with more meaningful options improves both their experience and their contribution levels. Rather than limiting

choices out of concern for overload, charities, especially those operating online, should consider offering a broader range of programs or causes. Doing so can help donors feel more connected, more satisfied, and more generous. This research challenges common assumptions about simplicity in choice architecture and highlights the power of variety in prosocial decision-making.

Contact  
Publication  
Financial Support

[a.yeganloo@jbs.cam.ac.uk](mailto:a.yeganloo@jbs.cam.ac.uk)

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