

The Effects of Party Cues Are Not the Effects of Partisanship

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Abstract

In this unfortunately negative review of *The Power of Partisanship*, I argue that the empirical evidence offered by the authors is not relevant for their main claims about the consequences of increased affective partisanship for political and everyday life. I reanalyze their experiments to concisely convey what they do show, namely that party support cues increase policy support among in-partisans and decrease it among out-partisans. My complaint centers on the mismatch between claim and evidence. The experiments provide credible estimates of the effects of party cues, but in my opinion these estimates do not constitute evidence for the central argument of the book.

Keywords: party cues; survey experiments

The central argument of *The Power of Partisanship*¹ is “that the growth in affective partisan polarization, and the resulting negativity voters feel toward the opposition party, has far-reaching, often toxic effects on how Americans behave both inside and outside the realm of politics” (3). The empirical evidence offered in support of this central argument comes from five survey experiments and a mix of designs for observational causal inference.² I will present their experimental results in my preferred format and describe why I do not think they provide evidence for the main claim. To the authors’ great credit, all of the datasets are publicly posted, well-annotated, and easy-to-use. In every case where direct comparison is possible, my reanalyses arrive at the same estimates as the authors, so there is no dispute about what the results are, only a disagreement about what they mean for politics and for political science theory.

Figure 1 collects together the results of studies 1 through 5. Study 1 is a party cue experiment in which subjects are asked for their opinions of four policies about which they have been given variously no cue information, a Republican party support cue, or a Democratic party support cue. For one policy (requiring a two-thirds

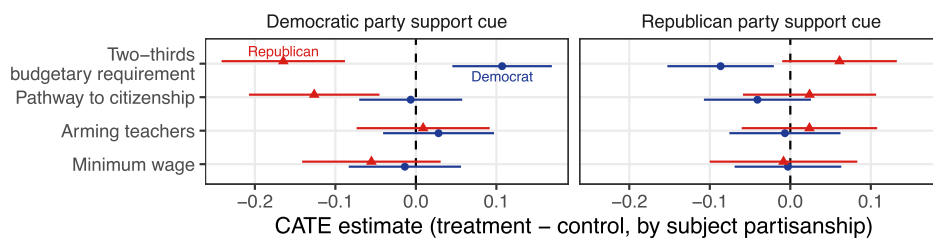
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¹ Joshua J. Dyck and Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz, *The Power of Partisanship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

² I am going to set aside the observational work entirely because the required identification assumptions are neither defended in the book nor in my view defensible in any case. One observational study compares pre- and postelection policy preferences, and another compares the policy preferences of white partisans with close Black acquaintances to those without. The authors also conduct a descriptive study of the political knowledge, trust in government, and external efficacy of Americans by partisan identification that does not bear on the central causal claim.

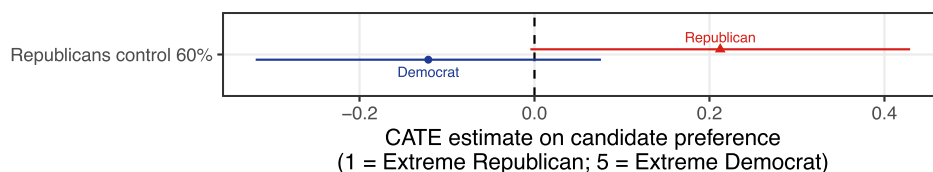
(a)

Study 1: Effect of party cues on policy support



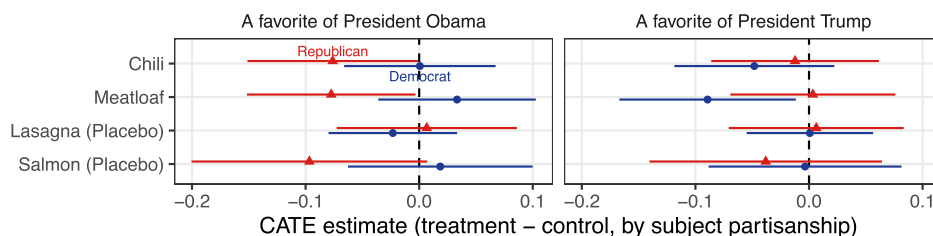
(b)

Study 2: Effect of chamber control on candidate preference



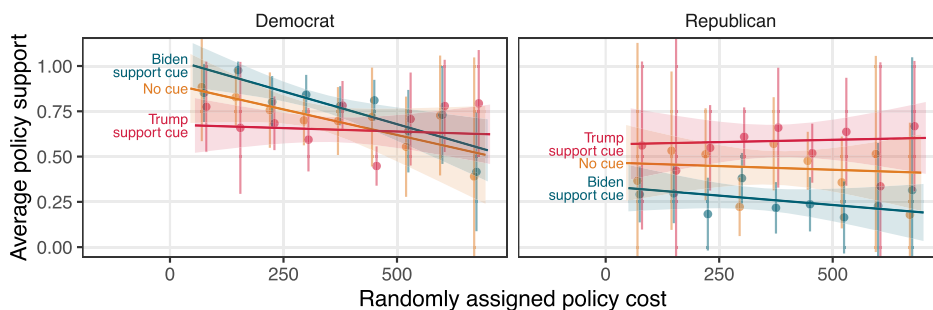
(c)

Study 3: Effect of party cues on food preferences



(d)

Study 4: Effect of party cues on vaccine policy preferences



(e)

Study 5: Effect of party cues on support for a risky tax policy

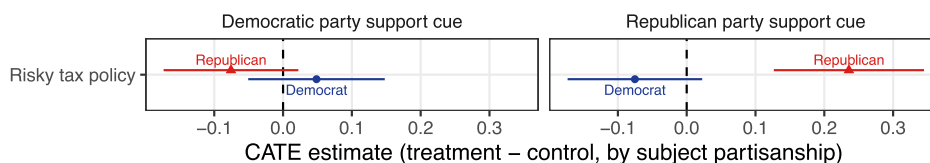


Figure 1. Overview of Experiments in Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz (2023)

legislative majority to pass budget proposals), we see clear evidence of the usual pattern that Republican party support cues have positive effects for Republican subjects and negative effects for Democratic subjects; the Democratic party support cue has the opposite effects. The estimates on the other three issues are closer to zero. As a side note, the authors credit “partisan motivated reasoning” as the explanation for the party cue effect. I think the “heuristic” or “inference” interpretation wherein subjects infer policy content using party cues is also available; the two theories make identical predictions about party cue effect heterogeneity, so I do not think it is appropriate to claim these experiments as evidence for partisan motivated reasoning.

Study 2 is a hypothetical candidate preference experiment in which the treatment is describing party control of a state legislature. When their party controls 60 percent of seats (compared with 40 percent), Republicans prefer a candidate who is more conservative. When their party controls 60 percent of seats (compared with 40 percent), Democrats prefer a candidate who is less liberal. Surprisingly (to me at least), subjects of both parties want more moderate candidates when the Republicans are in the majority and more extreme candidates when the Democrats are in the majority.

Study 3 is a party cue experiment of a kind; here the authors ask subjects how much they like various foods and the treatments are whether they given no cue or are told the food is one of President Trump’s or President Obama’s favorites. The lasagna and salmon items are placebos—subjects in all three groups were given no cue. The pattern here is that partisans express more dislike for foods favored by out-party leaders.

Study 4 is another party cue experiment that varies whether a “free-vaccines-for-all” policy is supported by President Biden, President Trump, or is described without a party leader cue. The experiment also varies how much the policy will cost to taxpayers. Democrats like the policy more when supported by Biden and less when supported by Trump; Republicans do the opposite. Democrats like the policy less when it costs more; Republicans apparently are not as price sensitive. Lastly, Study 5 is another party cue experiment in which the respondents have to choose between a “risky” tax plan and a less risky tax plan; subjects are randomly assigned to no cue, a Democratic party support cue, or a Republican party support cue. Relative to no cue, the Democratic party support cue increases support among Democrats and decreases it among Republicans; the Republican party support cue does the opposite.

To my understanding, none of these experiments estimates the effect of affective partisan polarization (main causal agent in the central argument of the book) since it is not manipulated. In four of five of the experiments, party cues are manipulated and in the remaining study, chamber control is manipulated. Consequently, the book provides no evidence on the effects of affective partisan polarization; we do not learn from any evidence presented whether growing polarization is toxic or benign. Furthermore, even granting the descriptive claim that affective polarization has gone up over time, the experimental record from the last two decades of the effects of party cues has repeatedly shown the basic pattern that in-party support cues increase support among in-partisans and decrease it among out-partisans; the book provides further evidence of this pattern but certainly does not demonstrate that the effects of party cues have gotten *stronger* over that period.

The introductory chapter overflows with claims about the “power of partisanship” that are not substantiated by the chapters to follow. “The power of partisanship influences support for democratic norms, willingness to engage in risk in financial and health care decisions, interracial interactions, and preferences on completely non-political issues like the choice of what to eat for dinner.” Partisanship is not manipulated in any of these experiments, party cues are. Cues do change the survey ratings of chili and meatloaf, but one wonders about the alternative explanation that survey takers’ food preferences are unchanged, but they would not miss an opportunity to express disapproval of a disliked out-party leader using the only response options available to them. This weakness is acknowledged in the concluding chapter but is dismissed because of the “events over the last several years.” “The power of partisanship blocks people from learning from each other, and from their neighborhoods, and even makes them blind to their own personal economic hardship.” The book gives no estimates of the causal effects of partisanship on learning or appreciation for others’ circumstances. “The power of partisanship ultimately makes partisans unable to respond to information not gained through partisan channels.” Partisanship is not randomly assigned, and the book does not randomly assign any nonpartisan information so that claim of “no effect of information because of partisanship” is fully unsubstantiated. (As it happens, the title claim of a strong study³ in this area is, “Partisans’ receptivity to persuasive messaging is undiminished by countervailing party leader cues.”)

As a piece of empirical scholarship, *The Power of Partisanship* suffers from a deep mismatch of the extraordinary claims the authors would like to make (e.g., “We argue that foundational theories of human behavior in the social sciences are disrupted among those who identify with one of the two parties.”) with the experiments they bring as evidence. There is nothing wrong with these experiments insofar as they credibly estimate the effects of party cues on policy support and chamber control on candidate preference. But because the experiments do not manipulate the main causal variable (partisanship) whose powerful effects the book is meant to be about, they do not in my opinion make empirical progress on these theoretical questions. The central argument might even be correct, but in order to validate it, we would need an entirely different experimental research program.

³ Ben M. Tappin, Adam J. Berinsky, and David G. Rand, “Partisans’ Receptivity to Persuasive Messaging is Undiminished by Countervailing Party Leader Cues,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 7, no. 4 (2023): 568–82.