

Explaining Partisan Affect: Partisan Response to Partisan Response

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Abstract

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Study I: Partisan Response to Partisan Response to Scandals

Does perception of the outparty as biased and unresponsive to political facts exacerbate affective polarization? Answering this question using observational data is difficult, primarily because partisans very rarely process information in an unbiased manner. As a result, it is near impossible to disentangle the effect of partisans' observation of out-party motivated reasoning from the effect of partisans' *own* biased interpretation of facts or events.

Accordingly, as a first test of our theory, we rely upon a randomized, controlled experiment to determine if and how partisans' exposure to out-party bias exacerbates the negative feelings they hold toward their opponents. Specifically, we use a series of vignettes about real political scandals and manipulate whether or not co-partisans responded to the scandal in an unbiased manner. This design holds constant both the scandal and the elite embroiled in the scandal, which helps to rule out important confounding variables that could muddle inferences drawn from observational data. Using this design, we can better assess whether partisans' (lack of) response to co-partisan elites' errors helps deepen partisan affect.

In November 2013, we recruited 930 survey participants through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (see [Berinsky, Huber and Lenz 2012](#)). To preclude suspicion, we told participants they would be participating in a broad survey on political media consumption and political learning. Prior to our experiment, we posed a question to determine whether or not respondents were paying attention to the survey. In particular, the question asked respondents to mark two particular responses. Of the 930 respondents, 38 respondents failed to complete the task as requested. We removed these participants from our sample as we felt that they were merely adding noise to the data. Because we are interested in *partisans'* reactions to an observed response (or lack thereof) to out-party blunders, we

further limit our analysis to responses from self-identified and leaning partisans.¹ Of the 726 self-identified and leaning partisans, 552 are Democrats, consistent with the general liberal bias in MTurk samples (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz 2012).

Participants were randomly assigned to read a news story on one of three contemporary political scandals: (1) the troubled rollout of the U.S. health exchange website, healthcare.org (which we classify as a Democratic Party scandal), (2) Senator Ted Cruz's controversial decision to force a government shutdown (which we classify as a Republican Party scandal), and (3) Toronto mayor Rob Ford's drug scandal (which we classify as a non-partisan scandal, thus representing our "control" condition). We selected these the Cruz and healthcare.gov cases because they were timely examples of real-world, high-profile missteps that generated significant news coverage. Within the non-control groups, we further manipulated whether Democratic (Republican) Party supporters' opinions of Obama (Cruz) changed in response to the blunder. This created five conditions based on vignette content: (1) Obama - reponse, (2) Obama - no response, (3) Cruz - response, (4) Cruz - no response, and (5) control. (See Appendix A for vignettes.) After exposing respondents to these stories, we asked them to rate the Democratic and Republican parties using feeling thermometers. We use party feeling thermometer scores as our dependent variables in this study because they are the most common means by which to measure affective polarization (e.g., Haidt and Hetherington 2012; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2014; Mason 2015).

Though our sample is disproportionately Democratic, we analyze the results of our experiment separately among Democrats and Republicans to detect any partisan differences in response to the treatments. We also elect to analyze the feeling thermometers as separate dependent variables, as previous research demonstrates that the growing gulf

¹We group together "leaning" Independents with "strong" and "weak" partisans, based on previous research suggesting Independent leaners think and behave similarly to partisans (Keith et al. 1992).

in partisan affect has been caused primarily by increasing dislike of the out-party and not by a corresponding increase in warm in-party feelings (Haidt and Hetherington 2012; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012). As out-party negativity is the prime mover over time, we might also expect our experiments to produce greater variation in the out-party feeling thermometers compared to the in-party feeling thermometers. Accordingly, our analysis produces four OLS regressions that analyze the impact of our experimental manipulation on out- and in-party affect among Democrats and Republicans.

Table 1.1 presents the results of our experiment. For each model, we include four dummy variables representing assignment to our experimental conditions - (1) *Out-Party - Response* (in which out-party supporters downgrade their evaluations of the co-partisan politician in response to the misstep), (2) *Out-Party - No Response* (in which out-party supporters do not change their evaluations), (3) *In-Party - Response* (in which the respondent's co-partisans downgrade their evaluations of an in-party politicians) and (4) *In-Party - No Response* (in which the respondent's co-partisans do not change their evaluations).² Respondents are assigned a value of 1 if they were assigned to that particular condition and a value of 0 if they were not. The dependent variables — the in- and out-party feeling thermometers — range from 0 to 100. Positive coefficients indicate an increase in warmth toward the party in question; negative coefficients indicate a decrease in warmth toward the party in question.

²*Control* is the reference category.

Table 1: Party Affect by Experimental Condition

	Republicans		Democrats	
	Out-Party Affect	In-Party Affect	Out-Party Affect	In-Party Affect
Out-Party - Response	6.640 (5.409)	8.991* (4.943)	0.428 (2.799)	-6.026** (2.749)
Out-Party - No Response	-0.972 (5.409)	-2.880 (4.943)	1.222 (2.970)	-2.635 (2.918)
In-Party - Response	2.942 (5.190)	-3.337 (4.744)	2.920 (2.848)	-5.317* (2.798)
In-Party - No Response	-4.191 (5.314)	1.375 (4.859)	4.075 (2.820)	-1.102 (2.270)
Constant	30.585*** (3.549)	63.171*** (3.244)	23.580*** (2.078)	68.010*** (2.042)
Observations	172	172	552	552
R-squared	0.025	0.042	0.006	0.013

Standard errors in parentheses.
*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$, two-tailed.

Source: 2013 MTurk Study.

Research Design, Study II: Partisan Response to Partisan Retrospective Evaluations

Discussion and Conclusion

References

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Appendix

A 1 Study I Experimental Vignettes

Figure A 1.1: Obama - Response

Obama Approval Plummets Among Democrats After Obamacare Debacle

Associated Press

WASHINGTON, Nov 19 – President Obama's support among Democrats has nosedived after recent troubles with the healthcare law. Last week, the White House admitted that it had no estimated timetable or budget for fixing the troubled Healthcare.gov website. The president also faced scrutiny over insurance cancellations in light of his previous assurances that citizens who liked their insurance plans would be allowed to keep them.

Just 62% of Democrats approved of Mr. Obama in a recent poll, a 17% drop from the previous week's numbers. The president's approval among Republicans and Independents also fell significantly and now hovers around 42%. Democratic support for the healthcare law has also taken a hit - dropping nearly 16 points in the last month.

The latest figures suggest that just 26,000 Americans were able to enroll through Healthcare.gov, while 5 million Americans lost coverage. Democrats are concerned about the president's leadership. "People still haven't been able to get the website to work, and time is running out before we are all required to have insurance," said Tracy Benton, a Democratic voter of Virginia. "This is not the change I voted for."

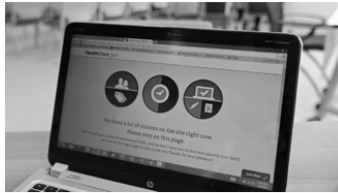
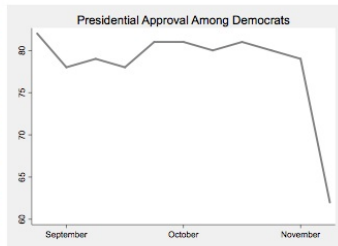


Figure A 1.2: Obama - No Response

Obama Approval High Among Democrats Despite Obamacare Debacle

Associated Press

WASHINGTON, Nov 18 – President Obama's support among Democrats has remained high despite the recent troubles with the healthcare law. Last week, the White House admitted that it had no estimated timetable or budget for fixing the troubled Healthcare.gov website. The president also faced scrutiny over insurance cancellations in light of his previous assurances that citizens who liked their insurance plans would be allowed to keep them.

Nearly 80% of Democrats approved of Mr. Obama in a recent poll, a 1% increase from the previous week's numbers. However, the president's approval among Republicans and Independents fell significantly and now hovers around 42%. Democratic support for the healthcare law has also remained positive over the last month.

The latest figures suggest that just 26,000 Americans were able to enroll through Healthcare.gov, while 5 million Americans lost coverage. However, Democrats are happy with the president's leadership. "People will soon be able to get the website to work, and there is still enough time before we are all required to have insurance," said Tracy Benton, a Democratic voter of Virginia. "I am OK with the small delay. This is the change I voted for."

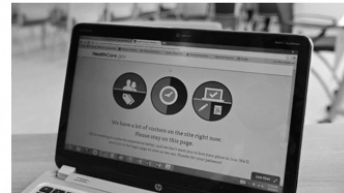
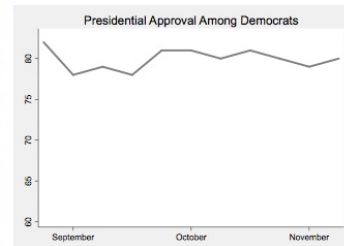


Figure A 1.3: Cruz - Response

Cruz Approval Plummets Among Republicans After Shutdown Debacle

Associated Press

WASHINGTON, Nov 18 – Senator Ted Cruz's support among Republicans has fallen sharply after the government shutdown. Many point to Cruz's filibuster in October as a media spectacle that hampered negotiations over the debt ceiling, and made the government shutdown a certainty. The government shutdown that lasted 16 days cost the U.S. economy between \$2 billion and \$6 billion in economic output, according to a report by the Office of Management and Budget.

Just 56% of Republicans approved of Mr. Cruz in a recent poll, down 14% from June. Cruz's approval among Independents and Democrats also fell significantly over the same period and now hovers around 47%.

Cruz's behavior in October fueled accusations that he was using the fragile economy as a poker chip. Now Republican voters are expressing concerns over Cruz's potential 2016 presidential candidacy. "I think we have a lot of debt," said Tracy Benton, a Republican voter from Virginia, "but (Cruz) is making our problems worse instead of helping us find solutions."

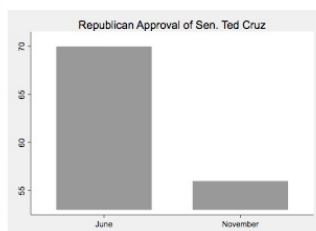


Figure A 1.4: Cruz - No Response

Cruz Approval Remains High Among Republicans Despite Shutdown Debacle

Associated Press

WASHINGTON, Nov 18 – Senator Ted Cruz's support among Republicans has remained high even after the government shutdown. Many point to Cruz's filibuster in October as a media spectacle that hampered negotiations over the debt ceiling, and made the government shutdown a certainty. The government shutdown that lasted 16 days cost the U.S. economy between \$2 billion and \$6 billion in economic output, according to a report by the Office of Management and Budget.

Nearly 90% of Republicans approved of Mr. Cruz in a recent poll, up 5% from June. However, Cruz's approval among Independents and Democrats fell significantly over the same period and now hovers around 47%.

Cruz's behavior in October fueled accusations that he was using the fragile economy as a poker chip. Nevertheless, Republican voters remain positive about Cruz's potential 2016 presidential candidacy. "I think we have a lot of debt," said Tracy Benton, a Republican voter from Virginia, "and (Cruz) is fighting to solve our problems and helping us find solutions."

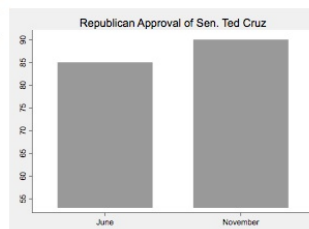


Figure A 1.5: Control

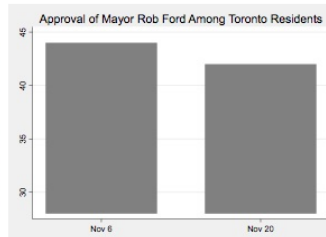
Toronto Mayor's Popularity Holding Steady Despite Drug Scandal

Associated Press

TORONTO, Nov 22 – Support for embattled Toronto mayor Rob Ford remains unchanged even as the scandal surrounding him continues to swirl. A new Forum Research poll found Ford's approval rating remains above 40% despite the ongoing crack cocaine scandal.

In the last few weeks, Ford has admitted he has smoked crack, bought illegal drugs after being elected mayor, "might have driven drunk," and used profanity in a press conference. Still, a poll conducted Wednesday among Toronto residents found 42% approve of the job he is doing, virtually unchanged from a November 6 poll that pegged his approval rating at 44%.

Said Forum Research president Lorne Bozinoff, "I don't think the mayor is dead politically. Some people might find it hard to believe. As crazy as it is, he's got that record and somehow, despite all of his private doings, he was able to get all this stuff done."



Still, the new poll numbers aren't all good for Ford. Around 33% say they'll vote for the mayor in the 2014 election, but 60% of those polled want him to resign now, including 28% of his supporters from the last election.

A 2 Study II Experimental Vignettes

Figure A 2.1: Control

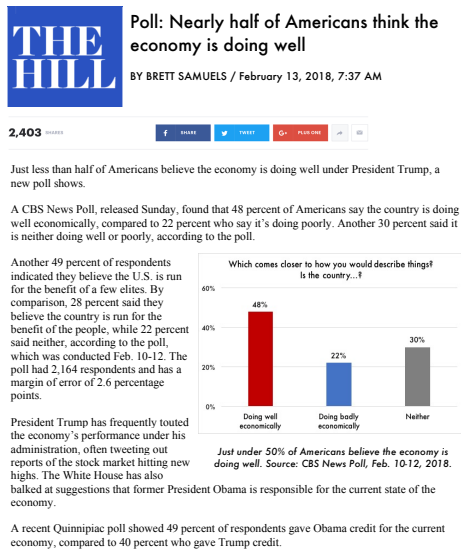


Figure A 2.2: Bipartisan Bias



Figure A 2.3: Democratic Bias

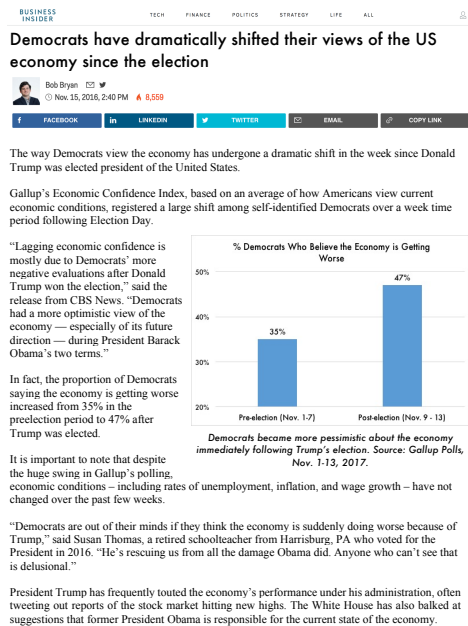


Figure A 2.4: Republican Bias

