Followers or learners? Untangling the roles of partisanship and reasoning in public policy preferences

Zachary Lorico Hertz

University of Chicago

Introduction

Americans partisans are more likely to support a particular policy when told that a politician in their party supports the policy in question. Scholars debate two explanations for this response to **party leader cues**:

- Perhaps, **people act as "blind" partisans** and support whatever is suggested by their party leaders.

- Or, **people thoughtfully reason** through policy information and simply respond to a source they trust.

I suspect measurement and design issues may in part drive the widespread claim that partisans thoughtlessly follow their leaders. My study improves on previous work in three main ways:

- I compare **party leader** cues to both **copartisan** cues from interest groups and **nonpartisan** cues, providing better baselines.
- I use the traditional support/oppose measure of preferences **as well as continuous measures of policy preferences**, which previous studies suggest more accurately recover inherent preferences.
- I test for heterogeneity in response to cues arising from preference intensity and policy knowledge.

I find that **previous research may overstate the influence party leaders hold over citizens' policy preferences,** and my findings provide evidence to suggest that contrary to previous claims, **partisans may indeed reason through policy information in non-partisan ways.**

Methodology

I utilize four survey experiments fielded among approximately 3,000 respondents collected via Lucid Theorem between March 16 and 24, 2022.

Respondents are randomly assigned to one of three between-subject treatment conditions: a cue from the respondent's **co-partisan leader** (Donald Trump or Joe Biden), a cue from a **co-partisan think tank**, and a cue from a **nonpartisan expert source**.

Outcomes cover four policy areas and are binary for two policies (health care and foreign trade) in which respondents view a policy and are asked whether they support or oppose the proposal. On the other two policies — the federal minimum wage and national security budget — respondents view a recommendation and are asked to provide their preferred minimum wage/national security budget as a number of U.S. dollars. Here, while the viewed proposal is randomized from a set of plausible positions, the sets are the same for all treatment groups within party identification; **the only quantity that is manipulated is *who* respondents are told support the policy in question**.

Main findings

OLS Regression of Elite Endorsements on Policy Positions

	Healthcare	Trade	Minimum Wage	National Security
(Intercept)	0.575***	0.717***	7.370***	−426.297
	(0.019)	(0.016)	(1.180)	(219.820)
Leader Treatment	0.063*	0.080***	−0.175	656.420*
	(0.026)	(0.023)	(1.649)	(310.640)
Copartisan Treatment	0.003	0.008	−1.478	313.107
	(0.026)	(0.023)	(1.641)	(308.667)
Cue			0.505***	1.353***
			(0.083)	(0.285)
Leader Treatment x Cue			0.014	−0.806*
			(0.117)	(0.403)
Copartisan Treatment x Cue			0.111	−0.403
			(0.116)	(0.400)
Observations	2145	2145	2145	2145
R-squared	0.00	0.01	0.06	0.02

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

I use the following model to analyze the survey experiments on policies with discrete outcomes (health care and foreign trade):

$$\text{Preference} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times \text{Leader treatment} + \beta_2 \times \text{Copartisan treatment} + \epsilon$$

The intercept is thus the percent of respondents who support a policy when receiving a cue from nonpartisan experts, the coefficient on "Leader treatment" estimates the increased support among respondents who received the leader treatment compared to the nonpartisan treatment, and likewise the coefficient on "Copartisan treatment" estimates the increased support among respondents who viewed the think tank treatment, compared to support among the nonpartisan treatment group.

I estimate that compared to cues from think tanks or nonpartisan sources, **endorsements from party leaders garner a statistically significant increase in public support for a policy and consistently boost support by an additional 6 to 8 percentage points**. I do not estimate a statistically significant increase in public support for a policy when people view endorsements from copartisan think tanks, compared to when the same policy is endorsed by nonpartisan experts.

I analyze the survey experiments on policies with continuous outcomes (the federal minimum wage and the national security budget):

$$\text{Preference} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times \text{Leader treatment} + \beta_2 \times \text{Copartisan treatment} + \beta_3 \times \text{Cue}$$
$$+ \beta_4 \times \text{Leader treatment} \times \text{Cue} + \beta_5 \times \text{Copartisan treatment} \times \text{Cue} + \epsilon$$

Because "*Cue*" is the numerical value of the policy suggestion, its coefficient is the expected $1 increase of respondents' stated preferred policy for every $1 increase in nonpartisan expert cue; its sum with the "*Leader treatment x Cue*" coefficient is the expected increase in respondents' policy preference for every $1 increase in the party leaders cue; and likewise its sum with the "*Copartisan treatment x Cue*" coefficient is the effect of a $1 increase in the copartisan think tank cue.

I find **endorsements from party leaders, copartisan think tanks, and nonpartisan experts equally influence respondents' ideal minimum wage**. Meanwhile, **I find that respondents are far less responsive to national security budget recommendations from party leaders compared to cues from copartisan and nonpartisan sources**; respondents shifted their preferences by just $54.7 million when party leaders increase their recommended national security budget by $1 billion.

Conclusions

Do partisans give new information serious, rational consideration when forming their policy preferences, or, as some have implied, do they mechanically defer to the preferences of their party leaders? While numerous studies find that partisans adopt policy positions endorsed by their party leaders and reject policy positions their party leaders condemn, no previous studies test whether people respond similarly to recommendations from other political and nonpartisan sources.

My results suggest that **cues from party leaders uniquely move partisans' expressed support** for policies compared to copartisan or nonpartisan cues **when respondents merely opt to support or oppose** the policy in question. **When respondents view and are allowed to respond with continuous policy preferences,** however, **cues from party leaders are equally persuasive, or even less persuasive,** than cues from copartisan and nonpartisan sources.

Ultimately, I find evidence to suggest that:

- **Partisans rationally update their policy preferences.**
- **Measurement issues might limit previous findings.**
- **Continuous measures of policy preferences may recover inherent preferences more accurately than discrete measures**

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Further information

Secondary analyses are excluded from this poster for the sake of brevity.

The full paper is available on my personal website and can be accessed at the following link: **https://zacharylhertz.github.io/files/thesis.pdf**.