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Followers or Learners? Untangling the Roles of Partisanship and Reasoning in Public Policy Preferences

By

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Abstract

Do people thoughtlessly support positions taken by their party leaders, or carefully alter their beliefs when given reason to do so? Many studies examine the effects of cues from party leaders on policy preferences and cast voters as party loyalists, but rarely compare information from party leaders to information from other political and nonpartisan sources and thus cannot disentangle whether people rationally update their preferences or blindly follow party leaders. To investigate, I vary cues to identify the comparative strength of party leader cues and test issue importance and previous knowledge as potential moderators. I find that when asked to support or oppose a discrete policy, partisans respond to cues from party leaders but not other cues. When respondents respond with a continuous range of policy preferences, however, party leader cues are not inherently stronger — and are sometimes weaker — than cues from other sources. I find limited evidence to suggest either issue importance or political knowledge significantly moderates partisan sensitivity to elite cues, no matter the source. These results suggest that while party leaders draw partisans to express support for individual policy planks, leaders' influence on underlying beliefs is far more complicated and voters engage in more cognition than previously suggested.

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1 Introduction

The perennial investigation into how citizens form their policy preferences and the exact role that political elites play in shaping these preferences (e.g. [Zaller, 1992](#)) has been at the center of a vast body of research, and a recent slew of experimental studies explore how signals from political leaders, or “party cues”, affect public opinion (see, for example, [Broockman and Butler, 2017](#); [Boudreau and MacKenzie, 2014](#); [Bullock, 2011](#); [Ciuk and Yost, 2016](#); [Cohen, 2003](#); [Druckman and Leeper, 2012](#); [Fowler and Howell, 2021](#); [Jacoby, 1988](#); [Tappin, 2020](#)). These studies commonly establish a process through which partisans are drawn to support a particular policy when it is promoted by their party leader or shirk a position that is disowned by their party leader.

This phenomenon in which citizens endorse the positions held by their party leaders has been observed to occur even when doing so contradicts voters’ own prior beliefs ([Broockman and Butler, 2017](#); [Lenz, 2012](#); [Barber and Pope, 2019](#)). The prevalence and strength of this phenomenon has led some to characterize voters as loyal partisans who care little for ideology or policy information.

Still, as noted by [Bullock \(2020\)](#), the exact scope of this phenomenon and its limitations remain under debate. Evidence suggests that policy information, ([Boudreau and MacKenzie, 2014](#)), prior attitudes ([Chong and Druckman, 2010](#)), and salience ([Ciuk and Yost, 2016](#)) may place important limitations on elites’ influence over policy preferences.

This evidence supporting a characterization of citizens as “blind” partisans whose policy preferences are driven by their party leaders’ preferences seems at first to indicate a wide surrender of judgement to political leaders that holds deeply troubling implications. Yet upon further consideration, evidence that citizens take on their party leaders’ preferences is consistent with two potential explanations that current studies fail to disentangle, one far more disturbing than the other.

The first is the worrying “simple truth” put forth most clearly by [Barber and Pope \(2019\)](#), who cast voters as partisan loyalists who indiscriminately and faithfully follow their leaders. The second more optimistically posits that voters are rational actors who, cognizant of the limitations of their own knowledge, respond to any and all information from sources they can reasonably trust and update their beliefs in response to the new information.

Current studies attempting to distinguish between these two cases are largely limited in several

crucial ways. Studies on cues from party leaders are largely subject to design limitations and a lack of “information equivalence” (Dafoe, Zhang and Caughey, 2018) that restrict their ability to adequately compare the role of information from party leaders compared to the role of information from ideologically congruent and nonpartisan sources. To infer whether people are learners or followers, reactions to information from party leaders must be compared to information from alternative sources. If information from party leaders hold the most weight, then we might more seriously regard the worrying normative implications put forth by the literature. But if party leaders prove to hold no more influence on public opinion than other sources of information — e.g. policy experts, interest groups, or media reports — we might regain confidence in voters’ role in government.

Accounting for political knowledge and how important an issue is to an individual should also provide further evidence to clarify our understanding of voter cognition in response to elite cues. If people indeed naively form their policy preferences by embracing the positions of their party leaders without question, then it shouldn’t matter how much individuals care about a policy issue, whether they have thought about the issue before, or how politically knowledgeable they are. But if people take a more sophisticated approach and update their policy preferences after reasonable consideration, we would expect issue importance and political knowledge to play important roles in shaping reactions to cues.

I apply a unique design to four survey experiments in this study covering healthcare policy, foreign trade, the federal minimum wage, and the national security budget to determine whether voters rationally respond to cues by updating their beliefs when given good reason to do so, or simply act as blind partisans. In doing so, I find evidence to support the former explanation: cues from party leaders may not shift partisans’ actual preferences more than information from other sources and concerns about the inordinate role of party leaders in determining citizens’ policy preferences may largely arise from design and measurement issues. I also apply different individual-level measures of issue importance to these experiments to further investigate the role of issue importance as a moderator of sensitivity to elite cues, but do not find evidence to suggest issue importance moderates responses to cues. Finally, I find limited evidence to suggest political knowledge meaningfully changes reactions to elite cues.

Party leaders may certainly influence partisans’ policy preferences. Yet, when drawing conclusions from continuous measures of policy preferences, the evidence suggests that ideologically-congruent

and nonpartisan sources are equally influential and existing findings may result from research designs, measurement choices, and expressive responding.

This paper reviews the motivating literature to refine theoretical expectations and explain how the study speaks to the shortcomings in current research. The paper then details the experimental design used, the data collected and analytical methods employed to address these hypotheses. The paper presents results for the primary and secondary analyses, then discusses the implications of these findings and areas for future research.

2 Motivating Literature

2.1 The Pervasive Influence of Elites on Policy Preferences

Public opinion is not perfectly informed, and the pervading influence political elites hold over public opinion and policy preferences is a well-documented phenomenon. While many people are unaware of the precise positions politicians take, even on issues that are frequently the center of public debate, citizens are often informed of candidates' positions when political events, media, or campaigns draw attention to an issue.

Research widely finds that citizens adopt policy positions held by party elites ([Abramowitz, 1978](#); [Bartels, 2002](#); [Broockman and Butler, 2017](#); [Cohen, 2003](#); [Jacoby, 1988](#); [Zaller, 1992](#)). In a closer examination of several cases in which previously minor issues gain visibility, [Lenz \(2012\)](#) uses panel data and finds strong evidence to suggest that, rather than changing their votes to align with their issue preferences when learning where candidates stand, voters adopt the issue positions held by their previously preferred candidate.

This theoretical perspective on opinion leadership, [Broockman and Butler \(2017\)](#) suggest, can be thought of as *position adoption*, through which voters simply acquiesce to the policy preferences held by their preferred candidates, often without reason. They contrast this perspective with *issue voting*, in which policy preferences drive citizens' vote choices, and *elite persuasion*, in which politicians can garner votes by persuading citizens that their issue positions are congruent. In field experiments using communication from state legislators, Broockman and Butler find evidence to support the perspective of position adoption: voters frequently embraced their legislator's positions even if the

legislator provided little justification. Moreover, they find that voters do not negatively evaluate legislators who take positions they disagree with, regardless of whether the legislator provided an explanation.

Evidence suggests that position adoption does not depend on ideological congruency between the voter and the position. [Barber and Pope \(2019\)](#) randomly vary whether Donald Trump takes a liberal or conservative position across several policies and find that, as expected, conservatives move to agree with Trump when presented with the conservative position more than liberal or moderate respondents. When told Trump endorses a liberal position, however, conservatives still agree with Trump at higher rates than liberal or moderate respondents.

These findings differ from previous evidence that citizens often embrace policy positions held by their political leaders by suggesting that this phenomenon occurs even when doing so contradicts the voter’s previous beliefs. “The simple truth,” [Barber and Pope \(2019\)](#) claim, “is that many citizens behave as partisan loyalists rather than principled ideologues.”

These vexing findings seem at first to depict voters as sycophantic partisans whose own policy preferences are superseded by those of their party leaders, regardless of the voter’s underlying preferences. A popular inclination to delegate ideological battles to political leaders holds worrying normative implications about further eroding popular participation in democracy, and suggests that individuals’ policy positions hold very little weight in determining political outcomes.

Yet this conclusion is also compatible with a second, more optimistic story, in which voters are exposed to strong arguments that contradict their prior beliefs and shift their views in response. A number of recent studies suggest this may indeed be the case; when provided with out-party cues, partisans respond to countervailing information ([Broockman and Kalla, 2022](#)), even in the presence of information from their own party, though these effects are generally estimated to hold less weight than in-party information ([Fowler and Howell, 2021](#); see also [Hertz, 2021](#)).

Of course, this is not to say that policy adoption completely explains the politics of issue positions, in all cases, without qualifications. In fact, the evidence suggesting that citizens may “blindly” adopt the policy preferences of their political leaders has been found to have several important caveats.

Some evidence suggests that the measured effects of partisans adopting party leaders’ policy positions may be reduced when citizens are provided with more information. [Bullock \(2011\)](#) finds

that receiving policy information affects partisans' policy preferences at least as strongly as (and sometimes more than) receiving cues from party elites. He demonstrates that when exposed to substantial information about a policy, partisans can hold policy preferences independent from the position espoused by party leaders and even oppose the cue. [Boudreau and MacKenzie \(2014\)](#) produce additional evidence suggesting that even as partisans follow party cues, they do not ignore policy information and, when informed and provided with a compelling reason to do so, moderate their preferences in response.

Further research finds that when partisans hold stronger prior attitudes they are less inclined to “blindly” take on the policy positions supported by their party. On issues with lower rates of undecided voters, [Boudreau and MacKenzie \(2014\)](#) find that partisans are less responsive to party cues. Similarly, [Chong and Druckman \(2010\)](#) find that strongly-held attitudes are resistant to opposing information, and opinions are more likely to change for the issues on which partisans' prior attitudes are weaker. In a broader study, [Druckman and Leeper \(2012\)](#) find supporting evidence that mass public opinion is more stable than previously thought and those with strong opinions consistently resist attempts to change their attitudes.

Finally, research shows that issue salience may curtail the effects of elite cues on policy preferences, though results are mixed. Testing two environmental issues, storm-water management and hydraulic fracturing (fracking), using survey experiments, [Ciuk and Yost \(2016\)](#) find that voters are more affected by party cues when asked about storm-water management than for the more salient issue of fracking. In a study of Japanese perceptions of policy messages [Agadjanian and Horiuchi \(2018\)](#), meanwhile, find that issue salience has a substantively small and marginally significant moderating effect on sensitivity to cues from U.S. political elites. These contradictory results necessitate further research into the role that issue salience plays in moderating voter sensitivity to elite cues, and while the exact scope of policy adaption remains inconclusive, its existence is ultimately well-supported by previous studies.

2.2 Hail to the Chief: Party Leaders and Policy Adaption

‘Elites’ is a term that can be applied to a wide range of actors in the public sphere, including politicians, policy experts, interest groups, religious leaders, and media figures — potentially even more-knowledgeable friends! As politicians are active agents who work to persuade the public, and

citizens' use of cues from politicians in their political decision-making is a well-documented process, the literature on elite cues has generally focused on cues from a variety of politicians, testing policy cues from state legislators (Broockman and Butler, 2017; Bullock, 2011; Ciuk and Yost, 2016), members of Congress (Arceneaux, 2008), or generic party cues attributed to abstracted politicians of a particular party.

Still, presidents and presidential candidates are perhaps the most prominent figures and most influential actors with influence over partisans' political views (Jacobson, 2019); enjoy a particularly powerful ability to set their party's political and policy agendas (Rutledge and Larsen Price, 2014); and occupy a unique role as the primary representative of their party's group identity (Filindra and Harbridge, 2020).

Despite the compelling theoretical explanation that party leaders may influence public opinion more strongly than other partisan cue-givers, only a number of recent studies have begun to investigate the particular role of the presidency's influence on policy preferences. This growing line of research broadly finds that cues from presidential nominees influence public opinion (Agadjanian and Horiuchi, 2018; Agadjanian, 2020; Barber and Pope, 2019; Fowler and Howell, 2021; Lenz, 2012; Nicholson, 2012).

Only a number of studies provide a close investigation into the role of party leader cues compared to other in-party sources, however, and their findings are mixed. Nicholson (2012) finds that party leader cues have the strongest effects on out-party opinion, but finds little evidence to support the theoretical expectation that presidential candidates hold an especially powerful persuasive ability over in-group partisans, and concludes that partisans respond similarly to cues from their party leaders and cues with generic party labels.

A growing body of empirical evidence, however, suggests that cues from the presidency may be uniquely powerful, moving in-party preferences while generic party cues fail. While Barber and Pope (2019) admit that their results may be a unique product of the time and circumstances, they conclude "there is something about [Donald] Trump or the presidency more generally that is much more powerful than a simple Republican label." In a study that directly pits cues from Trump against cues from Congressional Republicans, Agadjanian (2020) finds that the influence of the in-party leader cue does not diminish when faced with an opposing generic signal from the in-party. These contradictory findings suggest that further investigation is needed to clarify the role party

leaders play in shaping partisans' policy preferences, particularly when compared to generic party cues.

2.3 Limitations of Previous Approaches and Contributions

The claim that citizens may be mechanically taking on positions held by their party leaders, to any extent, in the face of other information remains controversial and the subject of some attention. Certainly, there are no claims that position adoption characterizes the way that all voters think about all policies all of the time. But while the strength and scope to which elite cues influence public policy preferences remains under debate, the relationship is clearly well-documented. As a growing number of studies provide additional evidence for this connection, considering its potential normative implications become increasingly important.

The notion that politicians may hold considerable sway over people's policy preferences is normatively troubling on its face. If politicians lead citizens to embrace policies they would otherwise oppose, it would appear that mass opinion places no constraints on politicians' behavior and citizens lack a clear ability to hold their elected officials accountable. Moreover if, as [Miller \(1992\)](#) states, democracy is to be understood as the aggregation of citizens' independently-formed preferences, then a broad surrender of these preferences to politicians seems a clear erosion of the democratic process.

Of course there are less sinister explanations under which we might observe citizens to defer to politicians' policy views in a healthy democracy. Perhaps when considering issues on which they personally know little, citizens simply trust that their elected legislators share their values, are more informed, and are able to use their greater information to make a decision informed on these values that the constituent would approve of ([Bianco, 1994](#); [Fenno, 1977](#); [Fox and Shotts, 2009](#)).

Additionally, some evidence suggests that the stated degree to which policy adaption occurs may be overstated ([Kertzer and Zeitzoff, 2017](#)). There are cautions that measurement error may contribute in part to the accumulating findings that suggest cognition has a limited role determining in citizens' stated policy preferences ([Bullock, 2011, 2020](#)). Bullock also concedes that differences in research designs may play a large part in explaining the seemingly contradictory findings in the literature on elite cues.

One particular variation in research design may begin to explain the apparent discrepancies in

previous findings: the source of the cues. Do cues from political elites have greater influence on partisans' policy preferences depending on who the cue comes from? Are partisans truly "blindly" adopting the policy preferences of their parties and leaders, or would they take the same positions if presented with identical information from a nonpartisan expert? The use of designs in which political cues are received from only one type of source (see for example [Arceneaux, 2008](#); [Broockman and Butler, 2017](#); [Bullock, 2011](#); [Ciuk and Yost, 2016](#); [Fowler and Howell, 2021](#)) crucially limits the literature's ability to answer these questions. Because these designs cannot recover the relative strength of voters' sensitivity to policy cues from political leaders in comparison to generic party cues or cues from non-ideological sources, we would expect results from one-dimensional designs under policy adaption and learning to be identical.

Additionally, while much of the literature focuses on cues attributed to generic party labels or from specific politicians and political offices, as previously noted interest groups or other nonpartisan elites can be the source of political cues. In one such test [Christensen \(2021\)](#) finds that generic party cues are equally influential over policy preferences as cues from nonpartisan experts. [Barber and Pope \(2019\)](#) and [Nicholson \(2012\)](#) reach contradictory conclusions as to the influence of generic party cues in comparison to cues from party leaders, however, and importantly no current study directly tests the strength of party leader cues against nonpartisan cues. Findings that partisans consider policy messaging from non-ideological experts with equal weight as messages from their party leaders might address some of the normative concerns surrounding previous research into elite cue-taking.

Finally, much of the literature on elite cues is constrained by measurement decisions that exacerbate a mismatch between the theoretical expectations and empirical measurement. The specific problem, as [Bullock \(2020\)](#) notes, "is that we do not let our variables vary." As covered previously, we do not expect that policy adoption is an all-encompassing explanation of the mechanics through which partisans evaluate policy messaging and form policy preferences. Researchers claim to acknowledge the theoretical expectation that responses to policy messaging vary in magnitude and mechanism. Yet the vast majority of empirical investigations into partisan cues sets measured outcomes as binary support for discrete policy proposals. Empirical analysis that constricts measurement to a set of presented policy options in this way potentially blinds the researcher to a variety of outcomes and individual preferences that may exist. Combining quantitative and

qualitative questions, however, may improve the estimation of policy preferences in a way that more accurately recovers policy preferences and reflects the complexity of policy evaluation outside the experimental context ([Ansolabehere, Meredith and Snowberg, 2013](#)).

Do partisans reason through their preferences or merely adopt the preferences of their party leaders reflexively? If people approach new policy information with more rational considerations and less partisan motivated reasoning, we might expect cues from nonpartisan experts, ideologically congruent advocates, and party leaders to each hold comparable weight over the public's policy preferences. But if people are truly ardent partisans as some suggest, then we would expect information from party leaders to move public opinion more strongly than cues from other sources.

In answering this question, previous theoretical expectations and empirical results (e.g. [Butler and Stokes, 1974](#); [Carsey and Layman, 2006](#); [Ciuk and Yost, 2016](#)) suggest that measuring issue importance may shed light on the extent to which people form policy preferences through active reasoning or unqualified partisanship. If policy preferences arise from partisans simply following their leaders, then we would expect to see issue importance have no impact on individuals' responses to policy cues from party leaders. If policy preferences are formed through more thoughtful consideration, however, we might expect issue importance to moderate the effects of elite cues. Specifically, as people view an issue as more important, we might reasonably expect their preferences to be stronger and less sensitive to any elite cues. Likewise, as people view an issue as less important and hold weaker preferences, we expect to see greater sensitivity to elite cues.

Political knowledge may further clarify whether sensitivity to elite cues is more rational or reflexive, particularly given the existing empirical evidence about the role of information (e.g. [Bullock, 2011](#); [Boudreau and MacKenzie, 2014](#)). As before, in the case where voters willingly support whichever policies are preferred by their party leaders we expect political knowledge to play a minimal role in deciding partisans' policy preferences. But because individuals with more prior knowledge about an issue are less likely to be presented with any new information, if voters pragmatically respond to elite cues by reasoning through new information and adjusting their beliefs accordingly, we would expect individuals with more prior knowledge to be less likely to respond to elite cues of all types.

Ultimately, the discordant findings and limitations of previous studies make it clear that partisans may certainly take on the policy positions espoused by their party leaders to some degree but the

extent and limitations of this phenomenon require further investigation. I build on the previous literature in several ways. Primarily, this study leverages a unique research design to understand the role that party leader cues, generic party cues, and nonpartisan cues play in shaping partisans' policy preferences relative to each other. By doing so, I provide evidence to resolve previous contradictory findings. Additionally, this study stands alone in its use of both quantitative and qualitative outcomes to measure elite cue sensitivity, addressing a key shortcoming of the literature. Finally, this study takes a new approach to address previous measurement issues with studies into the moderating effects of issue salience by developing multiple quantitative individual-level measures.

3 Data, Methods & Design

The hypotheses, research design, and analysis plan were preregistered prior to the start of the study.¹

3.1 Sampling Strategy and Data

I conducted four original survey experiments as part of an online survey of approximately 3,000 respondents via Lucid Theorem between March 16 and March 24, 2022. The initial sample consists of voting-age Americans. All participants viewed a consent form informing them of the study's risks, agreed to participate in a research study, were debriefed, and received financial compensation. The study's protocol was reviewed and approved by the University of Chicago Institutional Review Board.

Data was collected using a soft launch procedure in which 800 responses were initially collected to ensure the survey design, randomization procedure, and attention check questions were functional. Three standard attention checks are drawn from [Berinsky et al. \(2019\)](#), with minor modifications to the question wording. During the soft launch procedure, an error was found with an attention check question, which was fixed and the survey was fielded to the full sample. The pre-analysis plan was submitted before the soft launch procedure began.

To identify partisans, respondents were asked the standard three-point party identification question "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a...?" and forced to select one of the

¹The pre-registration plan can be viewed at https://aspredicted.org/9K8_FD1.

following options: Democrat, Republican, Independent, Other, or Not Sure. Only those who identified as a Democrat or Republican were included in the analysis.

Lucid Theorem employs quota sampling by age, sex, ethnicity, and region. Respondents who failed any of the three attention checks or did not identify with either the Democratic or Republican Party were removed from the sample prior to delivery of the treatment, and respondents who failed to submit complete responses are excluded from the analysis. Following this procedure results in a sample that has 1264 Democrats and 881 Republicans. 49.8 percent of the sample is male, 89.6 percent of the sample identifies as white, 45 percent has completed a bachelor’s degree or further education, and the median age of the sample is 43. The sample thus is more white, more educated, and slightly older than most American adults, though because the true target population are American adults who identify as either Democrats or Republicans a comparison of the sample to the theoretical benchmarks for the true population are difficult to estimate. Because treatments are completely and independently randomized conditional on respondents’ party identification, however, there should be no correlation between the demographic characteristics and the treatment assignments.

While web samples and convenience samples may raise concerns about descriptive inferences, [Coppock and McClellan \(2019\)](#) show that Lucid samples replicate experimental findings as expected and more closely approximate the demographics of US adults than other online platforms. [Hertz \(2021\)](#) uses a Lucid Theorem sample to replicate the findings initially collected by [Fowler and Howell \(2021\)](#) using Amazon Mechanical Turk and YouGov samples, boosting confidence in the ability of Lucid Theorem samples to specifically replicate experimental findings about responses to elite cues.

3.2 Survey Instrument

Respondents who completed the survey battery were first asked a number of demographic questions, including their state of residence, party identification, ideology, 2020 presidential vote, interest in the news, Joe Biden job approval, and Covid-19 vaccination status. They also provided five-point favorability ratings for Joe Biden, Donald Trump, Democrats in Congress, and Republicans in Congress.

3.2.1 Measuring Political and Issue Knowledge

Respondents then answered a set of three standard political knowledge questions drawn from the measure developed by [Carpini and Keeter \(1993\)](#), that are similar or identical to the questions used by similar studies (e.g. [Agadjanian, 2020](#); [Barber and Pope, 2019](#)).

Previous findings imply that because information moderates sensitivity to elite cues, prior knowledge may reduce partisans’ sensitivity to policy cues from elites ([Bullock, 2011](#); [Boudreau and MacKenzie, 2014](#)). In response, I design issue-specific knowledge questions to assess respondents’ knowledge within each issue domain. The specific wording of these questions can be found in the Appendix.

3.2.2 Measuring Issue Salience

One common expectation is that cues will be especially strong on less salient issues as individuals are less inclined to thoroughly consider the information at hand when evaluating the issue. Yet as noted by [Bullock \(2020\)](#), while issue salience is discussed in terms of the individual, previous studies in the elite cue literature measure salience by simply labeling entire issues as broadly either “high salience” or “low salience”. This method is a coarse measurement that fails to effectively speak to the individual-level moderating effect of issue salience and does not seem to be a particularly compelling approach. An individual-level variable seems more appropriate; after all, the cues that are perceived as important by one respondent may be viewed as unimportant by another.

Measures that directly ask respondents if an issue is important to them are subject to acquiescence bias. Meanwhile, Likert responses can measure attitude strength on individual issues but not the relative directional affect between issues (if an individual views both the minimum wage and national security as ‘very important’, do they view the minimum wage as a more, less, or equally important priority compared to national security?).

Instead, to measure issue salience, I follow [Rice, Schaffner and Barney \(2021\)](#) and task respondents with allocating one hundred points across a set of policies to indicate how important each position is to them, capturing relative importance and providing an advantage over direct response measures and Likert responses. Rice, Schaffner and Barney seem to find initial evidence that this measure may not be linked to eventual vote choice, however, raising potential concerns about external validity.

I address these concerns by additionally directing respondents to choose between each possible pair-wise combination of the four policy issues, and I construct a measure of issue importance using respondents’ choices. I then check the two measures against each other.

3.3 Selected Issues

Previous studies test elite cues on a limited set of discrete policy options. To conduct a broader study into the mechanics of policy evaluation and more precisely recover policy preferences, I measure policy preferences by soliciting a mix of continuous and discrete responses.

Issue	Outcome	Salience
Health Care: Medicaid work requirement	Discrete	‘High’
Foreign Trade: imported metal tariffs	Discrete	‘Low’
Federal Minimum Wage	Continuous	‘High’
National Security Budget	Continuous	‘Low’

I focus on respondents’ policy preferences over four policy issues: (1) health care policy, (2) foreign trade policy, (3) the federal minimum wage, and (4) national security spending. Despite the previously discussed problems plaguing coarse definitions of “issue salience”, I aimed to vary both salience and outcome type between the four policies.

The first two issue positions — health care and foreign tariffs — are the standard discrete policy positions of “Support/Oppose”. I select real-world policy proposals to reinforce external validity and develop a credible research design. This, combined with the use of cues from real-world party leaders places some constraints on the design, since the tested policies must be real, could be credibly held by both Donald Trump and Joe Biden, and are ideally proposals that are not polarizing between parties.² Fortunately, on the issue of free trade, a policy taken by both Donald Trump and Joe Biden exists: the Section 232 tariffs on imported metals implemented under Trump were “maintain[ed] but modif[ied]” by the Biden administration.³ Data from the 2021 Cooperative Election Study (CES) provides estimates of the policy’s general support and finds that the policy is

²If, for example, 90 percent of Democrats support a proposal that is also opposed by 86 percent of Republicans, information that Donald Trump supports the proposal may seem implausible and the message may lose much of its persuasive power.

³See <https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/582306-on-steel-and-aluminum-trade-trumpism-still-rules/>.

not overly polarizing, with 55 percent of Democrats and 65 percent of Republicans in support of the policy.

Because opinions on healthcare policy are increasingly polarized by partisanship (Henderson and Hillygus, 2011), a similarly credible position is difficult to find. Policies like developing a single comprehensive public health care program, expanding Medicaid to low-income individuals, or repealing the Affordable Care Act in part or in its entirety remain highly divided in opinion along partisan lines and have often been publically supported or opposed by party leaders. The 2021 CES finds that a proposal to require able-bodied adults under 64 years of age who do not have dependents to have a job in order to receive Medicaid is relatively less divisive, however, with support from 37 percent of Democrats and 63 percent of Republicans.

The federal minimum wage is an intuitive policy to solicit continuous policy preferences. There are frequent conversations around raising the federal minimum wage, which has been \$7.25 since 2009, most recently culminating in a March 2021 effort to raise the minimum wage to \$15 that was defeated with 58 votes against.⁴ The policy, in terms of hourly U.S. dollars, is defined in material terms that are familiar to respondents and easy to conceptualize. After all, most adults are employed and a majority of workers⁵ are paid in hourly rates, creating a convenient and accessible point of reference from which respondents can express their preferences. By essentially establishing a baseline wage for the labor market, the minimum wage also holds material implications for most American adults.

I turn to the national security budget as a second policy where respondents might hold continuous policy preferences. As the primary source of funding for the U.S. military it certainly has a wide-reaching impact, and because the budget is voted on every year its relevance could be seen as comparable to that of the minimum wage, perhaps more so. When thinking about the national security budget, however, people clearly lack a personal comparison point for spending that numbers in billions of dollars. Additionally, many Americans face no immediate material consequences stemming from changes to the national security budget, making it a compelling policy to coarsely label as ‘low salience’.

⁴See https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_votes/vote1171/vote_117_1_00074.htm

⁵See <https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/minimum-wage/2020/home.htm>.

3.4 Experimental Design

Thus, there are four within-subject conditions as participants complete a survey experiment for each of the four policy areas: the proposed work requirement for Medicaid, the proposed tariff on imported metals, the preferred level of the federal minimum wage, and the preferred national security budget. The order of these survey experiments was not randomized; respondents completed the minimum wage experiment first, the national security budget experiment second, the healthcare experiment third, and the foreign tariff experiment last.

On each survey experiment, the sample was split by party and respondents complete parallel designs that assign cues from in-party sources with all else constant. Respondents are randomly assigned to one of three between-subject 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. For the discrete policies (healthcare and foreign tariffs), respondents are told that a cue-giver endorses the particular policy, then asked whether they support or oppose the policy.

For the continuous policies (the federal minimum wage and the national security budget), respondents are informed of the status quo, then told that a cue-giver endorses a particular amount, which is randomized from a set of plausible policy positions. While the amount that the cue-giver is said to prefer 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* the policy is recommended by. Respondents are then asked to provide their preferred amount. The exact wording of each survey experiment and the set of randomized positions for the continuous policies can be found in the Appendix. Following the four survey experiments, respondents are able to provide feedback or express concerns about the survey and then debriefed.

3.5 Analytical Methods

To determine whether party leaders cues, generic copartisan cues or nonpartisan cues are strongest, I construct and evaluate the following model for each policy area measured with a discrete outcome:

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

Here, respondents' preferences are modeled as binary variables indicating whether they oppose (0) or support (1) the policy. *Leader treatment* is an indicator variable that signals whether the respondent received a support cue from their party leader and *Copartisan treatment* is an indicator variable that signals whether the respondent received a support cue from a co-partisan think tank.

Thus, β_0 represents the percent of respondents who support a policy when receiving a cue from nonpartisan experts. β_1 represents the difference between the effect of receiving a policy support cue from *a party leader* on respondents' support for the policy and the effect of receiving a policy support cue from a nonpartisan source on respondents' support for the policy. If the party leader cue is stronger, we would expect β_1 to be positive and statistically significant; if the nonpartisan cue is stronger we would expect β_1 to be negative and statistically significant; and if β_1 is not statistically significant the results suggest that party leader and nonpartisan cues equally influence partisans' policy preferences. The magnitude of the coefficient can thus be understood as the percentage point shift of opinions caused by the cue compared to the level of support among the group in the nonpartisan treatment while the intercept is the level of support among respondents who received a cue from a nonpartisan source.

Likewise, β_2 represents the effect of receiving a policy support cue from a copartisan think tank on respondents' support for the policy, compared to the effect of receiving a policy support cue from a nonpartisan source. If β_2 is positive and statistically significant the copartisan cue is stronger; if β_2 is negative and statistically significant the nonpartisan cue is stronger; and if β_2 is not statistically significant the results suggest that copartisan cues are equally influential as nonpartisan cues on partisans' policy preferences.

I use a similar model to test the relative strength of cues on policy areas that are measured continuously:

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

Here, respondents' preferences are the numerical values of the federal minimum wage or national security budget they favor. *Leader treatment* is an indicator variable representing whether a

respondent is assigned to the treatment condition where they view a minimum wage or national security budget proposal suggested by their party leader. Likewise, *Copartisan treatment* is an indicator variable for respondents who viewed policy proposals attributed to the copartisan think tank. Regardless of whether a respondent was assigned to the leader, copartisan, or nonpartisan treatment conditions, *Cue* takes on the numerical value of the policy suggestion respondents viewed. So if, for example, respondents were told that Joe Biden has suggested that Congress raise the minimum wage to \$15, *Leader treatment* = 1, *Copartisan treatment* = 0, and *Cue* = 15.

Because treatments are applied on the same scale using the same units, we can easily and intuitively interpret the coefficients of interest from this model. β_3 can be interpreted as the expected dollar increase of respondents' stated preferred minimum wage for every \$1 increase in the minimum wage advocated by the nonpartisan source. Meanwhile, β_4 tells us about the relative strength of cues from party leaders compared to the strength of cues from nonpartisan sources. For every \$1 increase in the minimum wage suggested by party leaders, we expect respondents' stated preferred minimum wage to increase by $\beta_3 + \beta_4$ dollars. Likewise, β_5 informs us about the strength of cues from copartisan sources compared to the strength of cues from nonpartisan sources. As the minimum wage suggested by a copartisan think tank increases by \$1, we expect that respondents' preferred minimum wage will increase by $\beta_3 + \beta_5$ dollars.

Thus, we can compare β_3 , β_4 , and β_5 to learn about the strength of cues from party leader, copartisan, and nonpartisan sources relative to each other. If partisans truly lend policy positions of their party leaders more weight than equivalent information from nonpartisan sources, we expect β_4 to be positive and statistically significant. If partisanship leads citizens to treat policy information from ideologically congruent think tanks with more consideration than cues from nonpartisan sources, we expect β_5 to be positive and statistically significant. If, among ideologically aligned sources, there is something particularly persuasive about cues from party leaders, we might expect $\beta_4 > \beta_5$. But if partisans consider information from their party leaders, copartisan advocates, and nonpartisan experts equally, we would expect neither β_4 nor β_5 to have statistically significant magnitudes.

I also test the effect of prior knowledge and issue salience using a similar approach to the one described above, by interacting the measures for knowledge and salience in turn with the treatment variables. For the policies with discrete outcomes, this model is structured as the following equation,

such that *Moderator* is the variable of interest:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Preference} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times \text{Leader treatment} + \beta_2 \times \text{Copartisan treatment} + \beta_3 \times \text{Moderator} \\ & + \beta_4 \times \text{Leader treatment} \times \text{Moderator} + \beta_5 \times \text{Copartisan treatment} \times \text{Moderator} + \epsilon \end{aligned}$$

Here, a statistically significant estimate of β_3 suggests that the moderating variable affects the nonpartisan treatment effects, a statistically significant estimate of β_4 suggests that the variable moderates the effects of cues from party leaders, and a statistically significant estimate of β_5 suggests that the variable moderates sensitivity to cues from copartisan sources.

To test the moderating effects of a variable on the treatment effects for policies with continuous outcomes, I structure a similar model:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Preference} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times \text{Leader treatment} + \beta_2 \times \text{Copartisan treatment} + \beta_3 \times \text{Cue} \\ & + \beta_4 \times \text{Leader treatment} \times \text{Cue} + \beta_5 \times \text{Copartisan treatment} \times \text{Cue} \\ & + \beta_6 \times \text{Moderator} + \beta_7 \times \text{Moderator} \times \text{Leader treatment} \\ & + \beta_8 \times \text{Moderator} \times \text{Copartisan treatment} + \beta_9 \times \text{Moderator} \times \text{Cue} \\ & + \beta_{10} \times \text{Moderator} \times \text{Cue} \times \text{Leader treatment} \\ & + \beta_{11} \times \text{Moderator} \times \text{Cue} \times \text{Copartisan treatment} + \epsilon \end{aligned}$$

To interpret this model we focus on β_9, β_{10} , and β_{11} . A statistically significant estimate of β_9 suggests that the moderating variable affects the nonpartisan treatment effects, a statistically significant estimate of β_{10} suggests that the variable moderates the effects of cues from party leaders, and a statistically significant estimate of β_{11} suggests that the variable moderates sensitivity to cues from copartisan sources.

Table 2: OLS Regression of Elite Endorsements on Policy Positions

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

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

4 Results

Table 2 presents the results of this analysis for the survey experiments using the full sample of combined respondents who identify with either the Democratic or Republican Party.

The health care and foreign trade policy survey experiments yield results that suggest party leaders hold modest but uniquely persuasive powers over respondents’ policy preferences. The intercept estimates that 57.5 percent of partisans support a Medicaid work requirement when told that the policy is supported by a nonpartisan think tank. Estimated support for the policy rises by 6.3 percentage points ($p=0.02$) when endorsed by a party leader compared to support from a nonpartisan think tank. When backed by a co-partisan think tank rather than a nonpartisan expert, however, the Medicaid work requirement is estimated to receive an increase in support of just 0.3 percentage points, a result that is not statistically significant.

Similarly, the intercept estimates that 71.2 percent of respondents support a tariff on imported metals when the policy is suggested by nonpartisan experts. When the policy is attributed to party leaders, however, support rises by an estimated 8 percentage points ($p<0.001$). In comparison, an endorsement by a copartisan think tank is not estimated to have a statistically significant effect on

support for the policy compared to when it is endorsed by nonpartisan experts.

While results from the discrete policies suggest that party leaders have a uniquely persuasive influence on partisans' policy positions, the results from the experiment on the federal minimum wage, meanwhile, suggest that endorsements from party leaders, copartisan think tanks, and nonpartisan experts hold equal sway over respondents' ideal minimum wage. For every \$1 increase in the federal minimum wage advocated by nonpartisan experts, respondents are estimated to increase their own preferred minimum wage by 51 cents ($p < 0.001$). When the same minimum wage is attributed to an endorsement by co-partisan think tanks, however, respondents raise their minimum wage preferences by just an additional 11 cents, and adjust their preferences by just 1 cent when the policy is instead attributed to party leaders. The differences between these estimates and the estimated effects of cues from nonpartisan sources are not estimated to be statistically significant.

The results from the experiment on the national security budget, meanwhile, suggest that cues from party leaders are actually less influential than nonpartisan cues when considering respondents' preferred national security budget spending, further complicating expectations. As nonpartisan experts recommended a national security budget that was \$1 billion higher, partisans stated Congress should budget \$1.4 billion more for national security. Compared to when they received suggestions from nonpartisan experts, respondents were slightly less receptive to national security budget recommendations from copartisan think tanks. In response to a national security budget recommendation from copartisan think tanks that is increased by \$1 billion, respondents preferred a budget that was \$950 million higher, though this estimate was not a statistically significant difference from the estimated effects of nonpartisan cues. When party leaders said the national security budget should be \$1 billion higher, however, respondents shifted their preferences by just \$54.7 million ($p = 0.046$).

I find results that clearly complicate the literature. Looking at the results from experiments where respondents are asked to support or oppose policies, endorsements from party leaders are estimated to carry a unique influence driving partisans' opinions. But when respondents viewed and responded with a wider range of preferences, the results reflect a more complex dynamic. On the federal minimum wage, cues from all sources moved preferences equally. But when considering the national security budget, respondents do not respond more strongly to party leader cues or even respond equally to all cues. Instead, partisans respond less strongly to the preferences of their party

leaders than to nonpartisan experts.

4.1 Heterogeneity by Issue Salience

I also investigate whether, as hypothesized, there is heterogeneity in the treatment effects dependent on how strongly respondents feel about the issue.⁶ I first examine an interaction of the treatments with the measure drawn from [Rice, Schaffner and Barney \(2021\)](#), in which respondents allocate one hundred points across the four policies to signal how strongly they prioritize their position on a given issue.

Table 3 presents the results of interacting the points-allocation measure of issue importance with the treatments for all four survey experiments. Using the point-allocation measure provides limited evidence to suggest that partisans are less sensitive to elite cues for issues that they view as more important.

The survey experiment testing a proposed Medicaid work requirement does find some evidence that cues are consistently weakened as respondents assign greater importance to the issue of healthcare. The estimated moderating effects of issue importance when measured using the point-assignment method, however, are only statistically significant at the 0.05 level when considering non-leader copartisan cues ($p=0.04$).

When respondents consider the proposed tariff on imported metals, meanwhile, issue importance is actually estimated to have a slightly positive effect on partisans' receptiveness to cues from elites. Respondents who assign more points to the issue of foreign trade and tariffs were more responsive to elite cues of all sources. The magnitude of this moderating effect is quite small, however, and is not estimated to be statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

For both the federal minimum wage and the national security budget, cues from both party leaders and copartisan sources are estimated to consistently be less persuasive than cues from nonpartisan sources among respondents who give the policy higher weight in the point assignment task. These effects are estimated to be substantively small, however, and not statistically significant. Overall, there is limited evidence to suggest that issue importance moderates sensitivity to elite cues in any meaningful way when using the points-allocation measure of issue importance to analyze

⁶As a test of the hypothesis that, across treatments, cues are less effective when partisans view an issue as more important, I interact both importance measures with the continuous cues given in the minimum wage and national security experiments. The results from this analysis are included in Appendix A.

Table 3: OLS Regression of Elite Endorsements Interacted with Points-Assigned Issue Importance

	Healthcare	Trade	Minimum Wage	National Security
Constant	0.529*** (0.033)	0.736*** (0.027)	8.256*** (2.209)	−390.424 (393.624)
Leader Treatment	0.096* (0.046)	0.067 (0.041)	−3.673 (3.021)	545.987 (544.145)
Copartisan treatment	0.081 (0.045)	−0.035 (0.040)	−4.450 (3.000)	130.626 (542.000)
Cue			0.457** (0.159)	1.289* (0.513)
Leader Treatment x Cue			0.260 (0.216)	−0.671 (0.707)
Copartisan Treatment x Cue			0.295 (0.214)	−0.101 (0.704)
Assigned Points	0.190 (0.112)	−0.075 (0.088)	−3.519 (7.072)	−135.996 (1235.277)
Leader treatment x Points	−0.134 (0.154)	0.050 (0.131)	13.269 (9.575)	389.552 (1800.749)
Copartisan treatment x Points	−0.315* (0.152)	0.177 (0.131)	12.367 (10.076)	865.632 (1764.592)
Cue x Points			0.189 (0.507)	0.244 (1.613)
Leader treatment x Points × Cue			−0.926 (0.681)	−0.468 (2.347)
Copartisan treatment x Points × Cue			−0.770 (0.719)	−1.389 (2.301)
Observations	2145	2145	2145	2145
R-squared	0.01	0.01	0.06	0.02

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

Table 4: OLS Regression of Elite Endorsements Interacted with Ranked Issue Importance

	Healthcare	Trade	Minimum Wage	National Security
Constant	0.828*** (0.047)	0.668*** (0.023)	5.480** (1.849)	445.214 (415.972)
Leader Treatment	-0.015 (0.064)	0.098** (0.033)	2.478 (2.538)	168.829 (599.489)
Copartisan treatment	-0.047 (0.063)	0.013 (0.034)	-0.430 (2.539)	157.090 (577.361)
Cue			0.561*** (0.135)	0.022 (0.544)
Leader Treatment x Cue			-0.227 (0.186)	-0.124 (0.784)
Copartisan Treatment x Cue			-0.014 (0.187)	-0.138 (0.756)
Ranking	-0.361*** (0.062)	0.154** (0.053)	6.479 (3.366)	-1015.713 (652.935)
Leader treatment x Rank	0.103 (0.085)	-0.055 (0.077)	-5.674 (4.722)	721.507 (924.865)
Copartisan treatment x Rank	0.062 (0.084)	-0.016 (0.078)	-0.347 (4.668)	111.049 (902.407)
Cue x Rank			-0.287 (0.240)	1.669* (0.843)
Leader treatment x Rank \times Cue			0.516 (0.336)	-1.020 (1.196)
Copartisan treatment x Rank \times Cue			0.131 (0.333)	-0.255 (1.167)
Observations	2145	2145	2145	2145
R-squared	0.04	0.01	0.11	0.07

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

these survey experiments.

The alternative measure of issue importance is measured by asking respondents to make sequential pairwise evaluations of the four issue areas. A ranking variable is given a value based on whether respondents preferred to prioritize the policy 0, 1, 2, or 3 times over 3 possible match-ups. The score is then normalized between 0 and 1 and interacted with the treatments as detailed earlier. Table 4 presents the results of interacting the ranking measure of issue importance with the treatments for all four survey experiments.

As with the points-allocation measure, using the ranking measure of issue importance provides limited evidence to suggest that partisans are less sensitive to elite cues for issues that they view as more important. While the points-allocation measure estimates that issue importance negatively moderates sensitivity to elite cues for the healthcare survey experiment, the ranking measure estimates that issue importance slightly increases partisans' responsiveness to cues from party leader and copartisan sources compared to cues from nonpartisan sources. Likewise, on the issue of trade the ranking measure estimates that issue importance negatively moderates the strength of cues from partisan sources compared to nonpartisan sources where the points-assignment measure suggested a positive relationship existed. These results, however, are not statistically significant.

The experiment on the federal minimum wage estimates that the effects of cues from nonpartisan sources are weakened as respondents rank the minimum wage as more important, while responsiveness to cues from partisan sources rise as respondents more highly rank the minimum wage. These findings too, however, are not statistically significant. The experiment on the national security budget, meanwhile, provides some evidence counter to the pre-registered hypothesis and finds that respondents respond more strongly to nonpartisan cues as they rank the issue more highly ($p=0.048$). The results do not find that issue importance significantly moderates the effect of either party leader or copartisan cues on national security budget preferences. Given these results, the evidence that partisans respond less to elite cues when they view issues as more important is mixed at best. Further research into validation of individual-level issue importance measures and testing measures over additional issue areas in future research may help to clarify these uncertain findings.

Table 5: OLS Regression of Elite Endorsements Interacted with General Political Knowledge

	Healthcare	Trade	Minimum Wage	National Security
Constant	0.541*** (0.039)	0.636*** (0.034)	12.343*** (2.604)	-165.591 (479.192)
Leader Treatment	0.014 (0.057)	0.090 (0.049)	-5.163 (3.534)	798.702 (668.095)
Copartisan treatment	0.049 (0.055)	0.079 (0.049)	-1.653 (3.617)	199.502 (674.473)
Cue			0.245 (0.185)	0.968 (0.622)
Leader Treatment x Cue			0.361 (0.252)	-1.018 (0.865)
Copartisan Treatment x Cue			0.081 (0.255)	-0.292 (0.875)
Political Knowledge	0.054 (0.055)	0.126** (0.047)	-7.544* (3.523)	-381.642 (653.944)
Leader treatment x Knowledge	0.070 (0.078)	-0.018 (0.067)	7.483 (4.816)	-264.611 (911.872)
Copartisan treatment x Knowledge	-0.073 (0.076)	-0.110 (0.068)	0.389 (4.895)	170.540 (924.265)
Cue x Knowledge			0.392 (0.251)	0.565 (0.846)
Leader treatment x Knowledge \times Cue			-0.523 (0.343)	0.389 (1.180)
Copartisan treatment x Knowledge \times Cue			0.038 (0.346)	-0.163 (1.198)
Observations	2145	2145	2145	2145
R-squared	0.01	0.01	0.07	0.03

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

4.2 Heterogeneity by Political Knowledge

I also examine whether the results support my pre-registered hypothesis that knowledge moderates the strength of elite cues on partisans' preferences.⁷ Table 5 presents the results of interacting the political knowledge measure with the treatments for all four survey experiments, and finds mixed to little evidence to suggest that individuals with greater prior knowledge are less sensitive to elite cues on the issue.

Cues from party leaders are estimated to be more persuasive among partisans with greater political knowledge when considering the Medicaid work requirement. The opposite trend emerges, however, when considering cues from copartisan think tanks: partisans at higher levels of political knowledge are slightly less supportive of the policy. When examining the proposed tariff on imported metals, the estimated strength of cues from both party leaders and copartisan think tanks drops among respondents with greater political knowledge. We cannot conclude that these point estimates differ from 0, however, and the experiments on the federal minimum wage and national security budget both fail to find that political knowledge meaningfully moderates partisans' sensitivity to cues from partisan sources relative to cues from nonpartisan sources.

5 Discussion & Conclusion

A growing number of studies suggest that partisans widely follow their leaders. And while numerous studies demonstrate that partisans adopt policy positions endorsed by their party leaders and turn from policy positions their party leaders eschew, the strength of this phenomenon compared to endorsements from other political and nonpartisan sources remains underexamined. This study uses a national sample to build on previous work by directly testing cues from party leaders against cues from ideologically aligned advocacy groups and nonpartisan experts. By comparing cues from these sources across four unique issue areas, I present a broad account of the ways in which political elites shape public opinion.

Do partisans give new information serious, rational consideration when forming their policy

⁷To test the general hypothesis that cues, regardless of the source, are less effective when respondents have more information, I interact political knowledge with the cues from the minimum wage and national security experiments. I include these results and a writeup in Appendix A.

preferences, or, as some have implied, do they mechanically defer to the preferences of their party leaders? When respondents are presented with a policy that they merely opt to support or oppose, I find evidence to suggest that cues from party leaders uniquely move partisans' expressed support compared to copartisan or nonpartisan cues.

When respondents view and are allowed to respond with a wider and continuous set of policy preferences, however, results are more complicated. As proposed in my pre-registered hypothesis, I find that information from party leaders does not considerably shift respondents' preferred minimum wage compared to other sources of information. Meanwhile, contrary to my expectations I find that national security budget recommendations from party leaders shift respondents' preferred national security budgets significantly less than recommendations from nonpartisan experts. I find very little evidence, additionally, to support my hypotheses that issue importance or political knowledge meaningfully moderate the effects of cues on policy preferences. I join others in a growing literature that suggest that, counter to claims of a public that processes political information almost entirely through a partisan lens, people openly consider and reshape their policy preferences.

These results have a variety of implications that paint a nuanced picture of opinion leadership and call for closer attention to measuring expressed policy preferences. First, I estimate that endorsements from party leaders consistently draw support of around an additional 6 to 8 percentage points, and the relatively limited magnitude of this effect should assuage concerns that the mere existence of policy adaption poses a fundamental threat to democracy.

The finding that national security budget proposals from party leaders were less influential over public opinion than proposals from nonpartisan experts or copartisan think tanks was surprising and counter to my preregistered expectations. One potential explanation may lie in the timing of the study, which was fielded during the early stages of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and may have drawn unusual attention to both national security as an issue and the polarizing records of both party leaders regarding the conflict. According to a YouGov study⁸ while a large majority of Republicans sided with Ukraine, only a slight majority believed that Donald Trump sided with Ukraine, and a similarly slim majority of Democrats expressed confidence in Joe Biden's ability to handle a foreign crisis. This distrust of party leaders in the context of an abnormally relevant crisis

⁸<https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/03/11/how-do-americans-remember-trumps-record-russia>

may have unexpectedly factored into voters' cognition about the national security budget and a careful replication should investigate whether the counter-intuitive finding replicates outside times of conflict.

Because the apparent magnetic effect of party leaders on policy preferences evaporates and even reverses when using continuous measures, a change that is consistent with recent findings ([Fowler and Howell, 2021](#); [Hill and Huber, 2019](#)), my study suggests that partisans rationally update their preferences and that measurement issues might limit previous estimates.

In particular, these results bolster previous work that argues while questions that use a simple support/oppose framework to measure preferences may be externally valid, continuous measures more accurately recover inherent preferences ([Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder, 2008](#)). Furthermore, the cognitive process through which voters access these preferences when presented with discrete options may differ from the cognitive process of evaluating continuous policy preferences. Of course, discrete policy positions more closely reflect real-world debate at times and should not be discounted entirely. But closer attention to potential differences in measurement and outcomes will bolster both our understanding of the literature on elite cues and our ability to construct precise and valid measures of political preferences.

While I find limited results to suggest that either issue importance or political knowledge significantly moderate the effect of elite cues on partisans' policy preferences, my findings are subject to several limitations. As previously mentioned, the points-based measure of issue importance has been found to have limited measurement validity in other contexts, which may partly explain the null results I observed. Additionally, the alternative measure of issue importance and the political knowledge measure have fewer than five levels. Small scales may lead to measurement error ([Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder, 2008](#)), which may possibly explain my somewhat muddled findings using these measures. Nevertheless, these studies still prove an important and rigorous improvement on previous measurement strategies that do not account for individual-level issue importance. Future research should aim to test these results using a broader set of discrete and continuous policies, and refine the measures of issue importance and political knowledge to reduce measurement error and increase measurement validity.

Presented with claims that voters' partisan social identities are ever-more-important drivers of their political reasoning, I provide evidence for optimism. While partisans certainly draw upon their

party leaders when forming policy preferences, and most strongly endorse policies that are presented by their party leaders, they rely equally on advocacy groups and nonpartisan sources of information to shape their inherent policy preferences. While others suggest that the entire policy agenda has essentially been surrendered to elites by thoughtless partisans, evidence shows that public opinion is not simply dictated by the whims of political leaders, but responds reasonably to many sources of new information.

Table 6: Basic OLS Regression of Elite Endorsements Interacted with Points-Assigned Issue Importance

	Minimum Wage	National Security
Constant	5.372*** (1.203)	-148.107 (219.310)
Cue	0.655*** (0.085)	1.009*** (0.284)
Assigned Points	5.607 (3.946)	190.598 (729.787)
Cue x Assigned Points	-0.423 (0.280)	-0.249 (0.951)
Observations	2145	2145
R-squared	0.06	0.02

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

6 Appendix A: Basic Interaction Models

To test my general hypotheses that cues will be less effective when people are more informed or feel more strongly about the issue at hand, I interact my measures of knowledge and issue importance with the continuous cues presented to respondents, regardless of the source of the cue.

Using the points-based and ranking measures of issue importance in turn, I construct a model to investigate how issue importance moderates respondents' sensitivity to elite cues in general:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Preference} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times \text{Cue} \\ & + \beta_2 \times \text{Issue Importance} + \beta_3 \times \text{Cue} \times \text{Issue Importance} + \epsilon \end{aligned}$$

Table 6 presents the results of this analysis using the points-based measure of issue importance. Focusing on the interaction between cues and issue importance, I find that as partisans assign more points to both the minimum wage and national security budget, they are estimated to be less responsive to cues, no matter the source, though this result is not statistically significant.

Table 7, meanwhile, presents the results of this analysis using the ranking measure of issue importance. On the issue of the federal minimum wage, as before partisans are estimated to be

Table 7: Basic OLS Regression of Elite Endorsements Interacted with Ranked Issue Importance

	Minimum Wage	National Security
Constant	6.172*** (1.023)	547.959* (240.009)
Cue	0.480*** (0.075)	-0.057 (0.314)
Rank	4.506* (1.904)	-718.468 (371.235)
Cue x Rank	-0.073 (0.136)	1.219* (0.480)
Observations	2145	2145
R-squared	0.11	0.06

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

Table 8: Basic OLS Regression of Elite Endorsements Interacted with General Political Knowledge

	Minimum Wage	National Security
Constant	10.000*** (1.438)	159.420 (272.993)
Cue	0.396*** (0.102)	0.541 (0.354)
Political Knowledge	-4.853* (1.957)	-395.485 (373.620)
Cue x Knowledge	0.227 (0.139)	0.620 (0.484)
Observations	2145	2145
R-squared	0.07	0.02

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

less responsive to cues as they rank the issue more highly, though this result is not statistically significant. On the issue of the national security budget, however, partisans are actually estimated to be more responsive to cues as they rank the issue more highly. This result is statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level ($p=0.01$).

Likewise, to examine how cue sensitivity varies at levels of political knowledge, I construct the following model:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Preference} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times \text{Cue} \\ & + \beta_2 \times \text{Political Knowledge} + \beta_3 \times \text{Cue} \times \text{Political Knowledge} + \epsilon \end{aligned}$$

Table 8 presents the results of this analysis. For both the minimum wage and national security budget, I do not estimate a statistically significant difference in sensitivity to cues as political knowledge increases.

7 Appendix B: Political Knowledge Questions

1. Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not?
 - The president
 - Congress
 - The Supreme Court
 - I'm not sure
2. Which party has a majority of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives?
 - Democrats
 - Republicans
 - Neither
 - I'm not sure
3. What is the office currently held by Charles Schumer?
 - Senate Majority Leader
 - Vice President
 - Secretary of State
 - Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives
 - I'm not sure
4. What is the current federal minimum wage?
 - \$7.25
 - \$10.50
 - \$12.50
 - \$15
 - I'm not sure
5. Which of the following countries, if any, has a higher military budget than the United States?

- Russia
 - China
 - India
 - None of these countries has a higher military budget than the United States.
 - I'm not sure
6. The Trans-Pacific Partnership is an international agreement about which of the following issues?
- Trade
 - Climate change
 - Humanitarian treatment in war
 - Public health
 - I'm not sure
7. To reduce prescription drug prices, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has encouraged states to import prescription drugs from which country?
- Canada
 - Switzerland
 - Germany
 - France
 - I'm not sure

8 Appendix C: Survey Experiment Wordings

Minimum Wage: Congress will be voting on many bills this year. The current federal minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour. [(Joe Biden / The Economic Policy Institute, a left-leaning think tank, / The National Bureau of Economic Research, a private, nonpartisan organization of economists) has suggested that Congress should raise the minimum wage to (\$15 / \$17.50 / \$18) per hour. / (Donald Trump / The Employment Policies Institute, a fiscally conservative think-tank, / The National Bureau of Economic Research, a private, nonpartisan organization of economists) has suggested that Congress should raise the minimum wage to (\$10 / \$12.50 / \$15) per hour.]

Using the box below, tell us what you think the federal minimum wage should be.

National Security: In 2020, Congress received a budget request for about 750 billion dollars towards national security. [(Joe Biden / New America, a left-of-center think tank, / The RAND Corporation, a nonpartisan security research organization,) has suggested that Congress should budget (700 / 750 / 800) billion dollars towards national security. / (Donald Trump / The American Enterprise Institute, a right-leaning think tank, / The RAND Corporation, a nonpartisan research organization specializing in security and defense,) has suggested that Congress should budget (750 / 800 / 850) billion dollars towards national security.]

Using the box below, tell us what you think the national security budget should be.

Foreign Tariffs: Some members of Congress plan to introduce a bill on American trade policy this year. [(Joe Biden / The Woodrow Wilson Center, a left-leaning think tank / the Council on Foreign Relations, an independent, nonprofit think tank specializing in U.S. foreign policy) / (Donald Trump / The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, the Council on Foreign Relations, an independent, nonprofit think tank specializing in U.S. foreign policy)] has suggested the bill should implement 25 percent tariffs on imported steel and 10 percent tariffs on imported aluminum.

Do you support or oppose this plan to implement 25 percent tariffs on imported steel and 10 percent tariffs on imported aluminum?

Healthcare: Some members of Congress plan to introduce a bill on health care policy this year. [(Joe Biden / the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank, / the Kaiser Family

Foundation, a nonpartisan health policy analysis organization,)/ (Donald Trump/ the Cato Institute, a right-leaning think tank/ the Kaiser Family Foundation, a nonpartisan health policy analysis organization,)] has suggested the bill should require able-bodied adults under 64 years of age who do not have dependents to have a job in order to receive Medicaid.

Do you support or oppose this plan require able-bodied adults under 64 years of age who do not have dependents to have a job in order to receive Medicaid?

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