

# The Influence of Competing Identity Primes on Political Preferences

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*In our increasingly diverse society, most Americans identify with more than one group. These multiple identities often align with conflicting policy choices, such as when a Democratic parent may support increased social services spending from a partisan perspective but may also worry about the increasing national debt as a parent. Given the significance of identity, political elites often work to prime identities that will win over the most supporters. A large literature documents the substantial role such identity priming can play in shaping preferences, but virtually no work considers the reality that identity primes often compete with one another. That is, different groups simultaneously prime different identities that align with their interests. In this article, I explore what makes one identity prime more effective than another. I do so by offering a theory of what types of rhetoric makes for a stronger identity prime (relative to other types of rhetoric). I test my expectations with a unique survey experiment addressing three issues. I find that, in a competitive setting, certain rhetorical techniques dominate and drive the identities people rely on when forming preferences. The results have implications for public opinion and identity in the ever-changing demographic world in which we live.*

Democracies rely on citizens to freely express preferences (Dahl 1989). It is thus no surprise that the cause and complexion of citizens' preferences continue to be a central matter of study for social scientists, particularly those concerned with democratic politics. Studies ranging from experimental work to game-theoretic models show the powerful impact of a salient identity on an individual's preferences. Identities may constitute highly stable traits, such as gender and race, exogenous forces, such as marital status and family roles, or mercurial g associations that become more or less relevant depending on context. Group memberships bias preferences, providing electoral candidates with an incentive to appeal to the identity groups upon which voters root their decisions (Dickson and Scheve 2003).

In this study,<sup>1</sup> one such identity I examine is the highly politically relevant, yet still understudied, identity of parenthood. Family roles are commonly emphasized when respondents list their most important identities (Reid and Deaux 1996), and experiences within families provide powerful cues for political preferences (e.g., Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009).

To no surprise, politicians commonly target parental concerns when framing issue positions and make frequent mention of parents during public appeals. For example, in the course of the four Presidential and Vice-Presidential debates during the 2012 election, the two candidates mentioned parents 48 times. When their parenthood identity becomes more salient, we know from existing work that individuals will become more likely to prioritize parental interests and concerns.

Yet, virtually all work on identity salience shares a common omission: it does not account for competition among identities at the individual level. Both scholarly evidence and common intuition tell us that individuals each hold multiple identities at one time that are, on occasion, associated with competing interests—and this may be more true now than it ever has been before. Detachment from traditional, overarching social structures are setting individuals free to identify with new and multiple social and political groups (Bennett and Iyengar 2008). Polls show the rates of interracial and interfaith marriages in the United States are at an all-time high: 14.6% of

<sup>1</sup>An online appendix for this article is available at [www.journals.cambridge.org/jop](http://www.journals.cambridge.org/jop). Data and supporting materials necessary to reproduce the numerical results in the article will be made available at [www.samaraklar.com](http://www.samaraklar.com) no later than the date of publication.

all marriages now occur between members of two different racial groups (Pew 2010), nearly 40% of marriages are interfaith (Pew 2008), and 21% of children speak a different language at home than they do at school (U.S. Dept. of Education 2011). Americans are increasingly likely to identify with multiple ethnic, religious, and cultural groups, yet experimental political science continues to prime identities only in isolation to measure their influence over preference. There are, to be sure, some notable exceptions: seminal work on crosscutting cleavages by Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) used observational data to illustrate how competing group interests hinder political engagement, and more recent studies (e.g., Hutchings 2001) demonstrate, again with observational data, that identifying with two conflicting groups has a detrimental effect on knowledge. But there exists no empirical evidence to explain how overlapping group memberships influence preference formation on contentious policy debates, nor how one identity becomes more salient than another in this type of competitive setting.

This study bridges identity-based preference formation with framing in competitive contexts. I designed and administered an experiment in which individuals are exposed to two identity primes that align with competing sides of a policy debate. I find that, when facing competing identity primes, an individual's preference depends entirely on how the identities are primed. When one identity group is primed with a sense of efficacy, it has undue influence over preferences, even in the presence of a competing identity. When an identity group is under perceived threat, however, it overshadows a competing identity, regardless of how it is primed. Finally, I find that priming two competing identities with equivalent primes results in no change in an individual's preference, suggesting that they effectively cancel one another out. In sum, the process by which an identity is primed is paramount to her ultimate preference formation.

## Identity Priming

An identity can be understood as “that part of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel 1981, 255). Each of these identities can be “primed” by context and cues (McLeish and Oxoby 2008). “Priming” increases an identity's salience and, subsequently, related concern for *identity-based interests*.

For example, whereas a woman's preference to withdraw troops from war may be based on her foreign policy preferences, her preference for universal insurance coverage of contraceptives may be based on her identity-based interest in women's collective reproductive rights. This latter preference can be conceived of as an identity-based interest. The significance of identity-based support for particular policies is reflected in frequent political appeals to identity groups who have a vested interest in one policy position over another.

Evidence shows that group identities affect support for policies ranging from redistribution (e.g., Scheve and Stasavage 2006) to immigration (Citrin and Wright 2009) and even candidate choice (Jackson 2011). These studies are useful in demonstrating the persuasive powers of our identities, but they fail to account for the fact that individuals are unlikely to sympathize with just one identity group. In fact, politicians advocating competing sides of an issue often prime multiple identities that are not mutually exclusive. For example, when a parent considers prison reform for sex offenders, her concern for her children's safety may influence her opposition to shortening prison sentences. However, when that same parent considers her political perspectives on incarceration, she might then find herself supporting prison reform that would introduce rehabilitation instead of incarceration. The result of this tension between two competing identity-group interests has yet to be tested experimentally in political science. In this study, I treat a sample of adults to two sequential identity primes by employing tactics that are commonly used to increase the salience of an identity: *mentioning* the identity, appealing to an identity group's *efficacy*, and imposing a perceived *threat* against the identity group.

By simply mentioning an identity group, researchers effectively prime an identity and increase the salience of that identity. For example, merely asking individuals to identify their race or gender increases responses and behaviors that are representative of stereotypes associated with that race or gender (Steele 2010). Priming identities by mentioning them is perhaps the most common method of identity priming in campaigns. For example, during the second Presidential debate of the 2012 election, President Obama stated: “Folks on Social Security who've worked all their lives. Veterans who've sacrificed for this country. Students who are out there trying to hopefully advance their own dreams... Soldiers who are overseas fighting... I want to fight for them.” Obama mentions these groups to increase their salience, but he provides no rationale for their relevance nor does he

make any connection between his policies and the interests of these groups. This is a *basic prime*: mentioning an identity group to increase its salience.

Alternatively, we can prime identities by highlighting the policy relevance of that group. We can remind individuals not only that they are part of an identity group but also that his identity-based interests can be addressed by public policy. Emphasizing the connection between a group's interest and a policy increases a sense of efficacy—both internally (that your identity group is empowered) and externally (that government responds to people like you)—which, then, increases the identity's salience (Van Zomeren, Leach, and Spears 2010). For example, during the same debate cited above, the President stated: “We've expanded Pell Grants for millions of people, including millions of young women. And as a consequence, we've seen millions of young people be able to afford college, and that's going to make sure that young women are going to be able to compete.” Here Obama not only references an identity group (women), but he also provides details of how the group's interest is being satisfied by a governmental policy. By supporting the policy, women can therefore protect their interests. I refer to this priming technique as an *efficacy prime*.

The third priming technique on which I will focus occurs when individuals are made to feel as though their identity group is threatened. During the Presidential debate, Obama stated: “Governor Romney will veto the DREAM Act that would allow these young [immigrants] to have access. His main strategy [is] to encourage self-deportation, making life so miserable on folks that they'll leave.” Negative emotions triggered by threat are powerful determinants of preference (e.g., Brader 2006). A *threat prime* raises the salience of a given identity when a group is made to believe that there is a credible threat against their group's interest (Steele 2010).

My intent is not to test whether each of these oft-used identity primes increase the salience of an identity in isolation, as previous work has done, but to determine how individuals facing multiple simultaneous identity primes reconcile their identities and settle on an ultimate preference. Based on an interdisciplinary set of literature, I developed three hypotheses to predict the outcome of identity primes in a competitive setting.

## Theory

Much of what we know about priming comes from work on a closely related subject: framing. The effects

of framing and priming are, for all intents and purposes, indistinguishable in the context of political science, and “the two terms can be used interchangeably” (Chong and Druckman 2007, 115). Both refer to the processes of increasing the salience of one consideration over another when a decision is being made. Issues can be framed using a variety of rhetorical techniques with differing degrees of effectiveness. The substance that renders a frame more or less strong or weak depends on its content and its relevance to the issue at hand. Episodic frames (involving stories or vignettes) are more persuasive than are thematic frames (involving statistic and factual data) (Aaroe 2011). The mere mention of an identity provides no emotional content but rather brings an identity to the individual's attention (Zaller 1992).

By contrast, the efficacy prime not only increases the salience of an identity by simply mentioning it, it also reminds the individual that a large mass of people share an interest that can be addressed by policy, thereby increasing its salience (Van Zomeren, Leach, and Spears 2010). By reminding an individual that her identity-based interest matters for group members' political choices, we can stimulate the sense that this identity group may have influence over public policy.

Finally, a threatening appeal increases identity salience by eliciting negative emotions. Work ranging from social psychology (Miller and Krosnick 2004) to psychoneuroendocrinology (Ohman 2005) demonstrates that threats are uniquely effective in activating human attention. The evolutionary relevance of survival causes a process known in cognitive psychology as “motivated attention” (Schupp et al. 2004). Across disciplines, we see that group-based threat increases both the salience of one's in-group identity and interests (Flippen et al. 1996).

## Hypotheses

My experiment tests these three identity primes against one another *in a competitive setting*. By assessing each of the prime's individual merits, I predict a hierarchy that will dictate which identity prime will “win” in influencing opinion. The relative strength of these three primes is rooted in existing work and is also supported empirically in a manipulation check I conducted with a random address-based mail-in survey, which I present in my empirical results.

I expect that threat and efficacy will both be the most effective primes when paired against basic mentions of an opposing identity, due to the added rationale provided in the prime. I therefore expect that the basic prime, which we know is of great consequence for

preference formation in isolated settings, will *not* influence preference at all when it competes with an opposing identity that has been primed with either efficacy or threat.

*H1:* An efficacy prime or threat prime targeting Identity A outweighs a basic prime targeting competing Identity B. Policy preference reflects Identity A.

Empirical work on competitive framing (e.g., Chong and Druckman 2007) shows that two opposing but equally persuasive arguments cancel each other out, resulting in no change in the dependent variable. I conceptualize identity primes as a type of argumentation—a justification for supporting one side of a policy. I therefore expect two identity primes of equal strength—which are each independently effective at influencing opinion—cancel each other out, and both become ineffective when used simultaneously (or sequentially within a close time proximity).

*H2:* When two equivalent primes target both Identity A and competing Identity B, policy preference is unmoved.

My third hypothesis focuses on the uniquely powerful role of threat. When efficacy and threatening primes face one another, I expect the threat will overshadow the efficacy prime. Although efficacy does dominate when facing an opposing basic prime, threat should prove to be most powerful in increasing the salience of one identity in competition.

*H3:* When one identity is primed by a sense of group efficacy and another is simultaneously primed by threat, the threatened identity will influence preference.

## Participants, Issues, Design, and Procedure

To test these hypotheses, I required three components: (1) a population who identify with two different identities; (2) policies about which these two identity groups tend to disagree; (3) a controlled experimental procedure.

### Participants

Voters in Illinois' 9th district have an unusually high tendency to identify with two distinct identity groups: Democrats and parents. The *New York Times* election profile rates the district's political composition as "solid Democratic," and election prognosticator Nate Silver estimated the chance of the district electing

a Democrat candidate in 2012 at "100%"—a safe bet, considering that the last time a Republican was elected to represent the district in the U.S. Congress was in 1946. Meanwhile, roughly a third of residents in the 9th district have children under the age of 18 living at home. Parents are even more common among voters, since they are especially likely to turnout, relative to adults without children (e.g., Plutzer 2002, 43). By administering a survey experiment to a sample of voters in Illinois' 9th district, I was able to ensure a high percentage of Democratic parents would be included among my participants.

These identity groups provide two conflicting group-based allegiances—one to a political identity group and one to a social role—both of which are often exploited in political rhetoric. Party identification is a group-based identity that politicians use to appeal to voters. When their party is having a successful year, candidates are more likely to broadcast their association with it. During a bad year for their party, however, candidates will distance themselves from the group label. With colors, logos, and even animals (donkeys and elephants, to be precise), parties have an array of tools at their disposal to prime voters to think of themselves as Republicans or Democrats and, subsequently, to support policies that align with their preferred group.

Parents are frequently targeted in political campaigns and advertisements. During the seven major speeches<sup>2</sup> he delivered during his first term as President, Obama referred to parenthood 25 times. In the 2012 presidential election, candidates followed suit. "Every dollar of deficit spending must be borrowed, with the bill sent to our children to pay back," Mitt Romney stated on his website. In his speech at the 2012 Democratic National Convention, Obama accepted his nomination to run for reelection by stating: "Over the next few years, big decisions will be made . . . decisions that will have a huge impact on our lives and our children's lives for decades to come." With a sample of Democrats who are also parents, my experimental design allows me to study the effects of priming these two identities simultaneously in a competitive setting.

### Issues

Based on public opinion and polling data, I found that parents and Democrats tend to, on average,

<sup>2</sup>The Miller Center Public Affairs Presidential Speech Archive documents the "most important" speeches delivered during each Presidential term. See [millercenter.org/president/speeches](http://millercenter.org/president/speeches).

disagree about several distinct issues, allowing for a robust test of my hypotheses.

**Social Service Spending versus Reductions in Spending.** When it comes to the trade-off between limiting government spending to minimize the deficit and providing social benefits for those in need, Democrats tend to support the latter. Data provided by American National Election Studies (ANES 2008) indicate that 78% of Democrats favor increasing federal spending on social services. While parents are certainly not *opposed* to social service spending, they are distinct in the degree to which the growing national deficit concerns them. In the 2008 ANES, 15% of Democrats said they oppose “the federal government doing things now to reduce the budget deficit.” Only 9% of Republicans, by contrast, opposed reducing the deficit. Parents within the Democratic Party tend to echo Republican sentiments—just 11% of Democratic parents opposed measures to reduce the deficit. Politicians have appealed to parents’ concern about the national debt for decades; President Eisenhower proclaimed in his 1960 State of the Union Address, “I do not feel that any amount can be properly called a surplus as long as the nation is in debt. I prefer not think of such an item as a reduction on our children’s inherited mortgage” (quoted in Bowen, Davis, and Kopf 1960). I measured opinion on this issue by asking: “When it comes to government spending on social services, which do you think is a more important consideration: limiting the national deficit so it does not fall to future generations to resolve, or spending to ensure help for those who currently need it?”

**Increased versus Decreased Spending on National Security.** Concerns with security divide Democrats from parents. In 2008, the ANES found 30% of Democrats favored decreasing spending on national security; less than 1% of Republicans agreed. Meanwhile, public opinion research shows that individuals with children are most likely to support anti-terror and national security measures (Featherman, Phillips, and Liu 2004). For example, Phillips, Prince, and Schiebelhut (2004) show that, in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, parents and those living with children were more likely to fear terrorism, as compared to other adults. In the case of American security policy specifically, rhetoric is frequently targeted at garnering parents’ support for anti-terrorism measures (see Schonberg 2007). For example, President Bush urged Americans to “live your lives and hug your children, even in the face of threat” (Schonberg 2007, 11). I measured opinion on this issue by asking: “If you were making up the budget for the federal government this

year, would you decrease spending for anti-terrorism defenses in the United States, keep spending at the same level, or increase spending for anti-terrorism defenses?”

**Longer Prison Sentences versus Rehabilitation for Sex Offenders.** Sentencing—specifically for sex offenders—is another issue about which Democrats and parents disagree. In their quest for increased prisoner rehabilitation, elected Democrats favor legislation that reduces prison sentences in favor of transitional programs that ease prisoners back into society. Recent legislation introduced by Democratic legislators (e.g., SB 500 in New Hampshire and HB 5211 in Connecticut) has sought to reduce sentencing for sex offenders in favor of rehabilitative programs. In both examples, Republicans opposed the measures—and parents are similarly wary. Parents are more fearful of crime in general and of sexual offenses specifically (e.g., Levenson et al. 2007); those who most fear crime are most supportive of sanctioning it (Hurwitz and Smithy 1998). I measure policy opinion about this issue by asking respondents the following question: “The U.S. currently imprisons more of its population than any other country, at an annual cost of \$27,000 per inmate. Sex criminals are among the fastest-growing part of the prison population. In an effort to lessen costs and to improve prisoner rehabilitation, some states have allowed sex offenders to leave prison nine months early under intense supervision. To what extent do you oppose or support such a law?”

## Design

A 3×3 factorial experiment allows me to test the influence of competing identity primes on a sample of Democratic parents. I divided the sample into nine treatment groups (see Table 1), each receiving one survey question containing a Democratic prime (either basic, efficacy, or threat) followed by a survey question containing a parent prime (either basic, efficacy, or threat).<sup>3</sup> I assigned one control group of participants no primes at all.

After being exposed to these two competing primes, individuals in experimental conditions answered identical questions regarding the aforementioned policy issues. They also answered a brief section of demographic questions. (Wording of the primes and of all demographic questions is provided in the online appendix.) Individuals randomly assigned to the

<sup>3</sup>The order of the primes is consistent. If distinct orders affect opinions differently, the result would not be comparable within conditions (e.g., Druckman, Fein, and Leeper 2012).

TABLE 1 Experimental Conditions

	Parent Identity: Basic Prime	Parent Identity: Efficacy Prime	Parent Identity: Threat Prime
Democrat identity: Basic prime	Condition 6: No change from control group (H2)	Condition 3: Efficacy prime will overshadow basic mention. Parental concerns will most influence policy choice (H1)	Condition 5: Threat prime will overshadow basic mention. Parental concerns will most influence policy choice (H1)
Democrat identity: Efficacy prime	Condition 2: Efficacy prime will overshadow basic prime. Democratic concerns will most influence policy choice (H1)	Condition 7: No change from control group (H2)	Condition 10: Threatening prime will overshadow efficacy prime. Parent concerns will most influence policy choice (H3)
Democrat identity: Threat prime	Condition 4: Threat prime will overshadow basic prime. Democratic concerns will most influence policy choice (H1)	Condition 9: Threatening prime will overshadow efficacy prime. Democratic concerns will most influence policy choice (H3)	Condition 8: No change from control group (H2)

Note: A control group labeled "Condition 1" did not receive any identity priming treatments and served as the Control Group.

control group (*Condition 1*) simply answered the policy questions and demographic questions, without being exposed to any identity priming questions.

Individuals in Conditions 2 through 5 receive two immediately consecutive primes in a competitive setting to test Hypothesis 1. Condition 2 respondents receive an efficacy prime to the Democratic identity followed immediately by a basic mention of being a parent. Hypothesis 1 predicts the efficacy prime will outweigh the basic mention and, therefore, respondents will bias their preferences in favor of Democratic interests. Those in Condition 3 receive a basic mention of being a Democrat immediately followed by an efficacy prime to their parent identity. These respondents are expected to express preferences that reflect their interests as a parent. In Condition 4, respondents receive a threat to their Democratic identity followed by a basic mention of their parent identity. Hypothesis 1 states that responses will reflect Democratic interests. Individuals in Condition 5 receive a basic mention to their Democratic identity followed by a threatening prime to their parent identity. Hypothesis 1 predicts that the threat prime will outweigh the basic mention; therefore, respondents will prioritize parental interests.

Individuals in Conditions 6 through 8 receive two competing identity primes of equal strength to test Hypotheses 2. Those in Condition 6 face a basic mention of being a Democrat followed with a basic mention of being a parent. Hypothesis 2 predicts two

priming techniques of *equal strength* will cancel out one another and result in no significant change from the control group. Those in Condition 7 receive two efficacy primes: one to the Democratic identity, then one targeting their identity as a parent. Individuals in Condition 8 face two threatening primes, one against each identity. These respondents, in line with Hypothesis 2, are not expected to change their preferences relative to those in the control group.

Finally, individuals in Conditions 9 and 10 receive one threatening prime and one efficacy prime. Individuals in Condition 9 receive a threat prime to their Democratic identity followed by an efficacy prime to their parent identity. Hypothesis 3 predicts that the threat will dominate, and respondents will express preferences reflective of Democratic interests. Condition 10 pits a threat to the parental identity against an efficacy prime to the Democratic identity. Respondents in Condition 10 should express preferences reflective of parental interests.

## Data and Methods

This study involves two separate samples. First, on Election Day of 2010, a team of 25 pollsters handed out anonymous self-administered surveys to voters departing the polling stations at random voting locations throughout Illinois' 9<sup>th</sup> district. Pollsters offered

respondents a \$5 gift card as compensation for filling out a survey on political opinions for an academic research project. Participants randomly received one of the 10 surveys outlined above. (Each survey was randomized across polling sites, so the conditions were not correlated with the polling locations.) In total, 701 individuals completed the survey at a response rate of 70%.<sup>4</sup> Among these respondents, 428 identified themselves in the survey as parents and Democrats. In my analysis of the data, I analyzed respondents who were both a Democrat and a parent.

In March 2012, a second sample of 263 Democratic parents in Illinois 9<sup>th</sup> district completed a survey experiment via a mail-in survey to administer manipulation checks on the priming techniques used in the main study. This sample was collected using a randomized address-based sampling method. I randomly assigned respondents to one of three treatment conditions: one group received basic mentions of their parent identities and their Democratic identities, one group received efficacy primes targeting their parent identity and their political identity, and a third group received threatening primes targeting their parent identities and their political identities. Approximately 4,000 surveys were sent out, and 437 were returned (response rate of 10.9%). Among them, 173 were excluded from the analyses since they did not identify themselves as Democrats and also as parents. This left 263 respondents who were roughly evenly divided among the three treatment groups. In the next section, I will first present the results from the primary study. I will then present results from the manipulation checks.

## Results

### Identity Primes in a Competitive Setting

Those who received no primes at all (the control group) are the basis of comparison against which all other conditions are measured. I label the control group “No Identity Primes.”

**Social Services Spending.** Figures 1 and 2 display responses to the issue of social services spending. Hypothesis 1a predicts that an efficacy prime to one identity will outweigh a mere mention of a competing identity. Hypothesis 1b predicts that a threatening

prime to one identity will similarly outweigh a mention of a competing identity (Hypothesis 1b). Indeed, the data show this to be the case (see Figure 1). On the top panel of Figure 1, we can see that efficacy primes for parents combined with basic mentions of Democrats significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ) move opinion from the control group (4.29) closer to “definitely limit the deficit” (3.82). Efficacy primes targeted at Democrats combined with basic mentions of parents significantly ( $p < 0.01$ ) move opinion closer to “definitely ensure spending” (5.09).

When threat is used against one identity while no rhetoric is used against the other (see bottom panel of Figure 1), the effect of threats is even stronger than was the effect of the efficacy prime. By threatening parents while mentioning Democrats, opinion significantly ( $p < 0.01$ ) decreased to 3.56—a 55% larger decrease than what we saw when an efficacy prime faced a competing mention. A threat to Democrats while mentioning parents also caused a significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) change in response; opinion increased to 5.75, which is an 83% change in movement as compared to the efficacy prime to Democrats coupled with the mention of parents. Hypothesis 1a and Hypothesis 1b are both strongly supported.<sup>5</sup> Comparing these hypotheses, we see particularly large effects of threat.

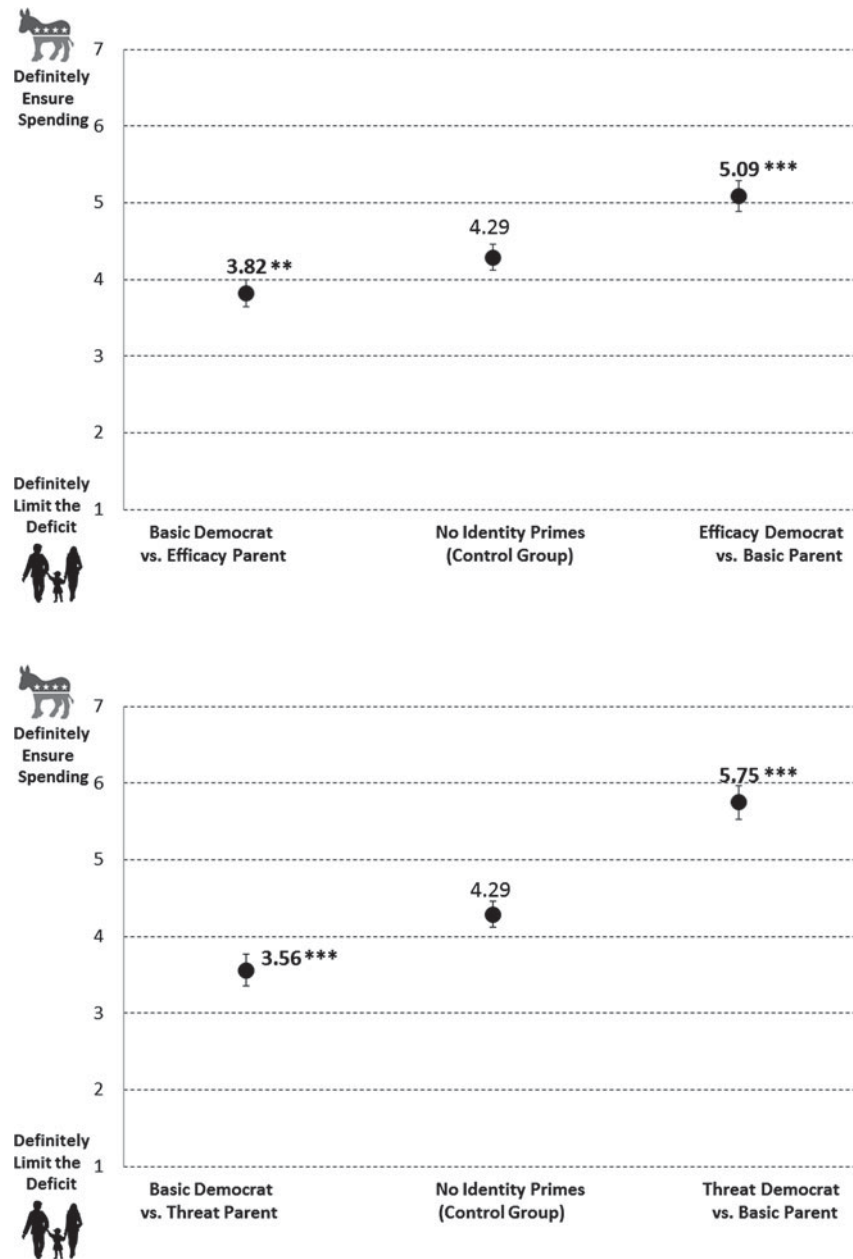
Hypothesis 2 states that two of the same identity primes will cancel out. Indeed, this was the case for two simultaneous mentions, two efficacy primes, as well as two simultaneous threats. As the top panel of Figure 2 illustrates, none of these conditions moved opinion from the control group.

My third and final hypothesis states that threatening appeals to one identity outweigh efficacy primes to a competing identity. My data show that when one identity is threatened while the other is simultaneously primed with efficacy, the threatened identity significantly moves preference (see bottom panel of Figure 2). When I threatened parents while using an efficacy prime to target Democrats, opinion was significantly ( $p < 0.01$ ) moved downwards to 3.63. Conversely, when I threatened Democrats while using efficacy to target parents, opinion significantly ( $p < 0.01$ ) moved up to 5.56. In both cases, the magnitude of the threat’s impact against a competing efficacy prime is just slightly less than it was against a basic mention (in Hypothesis 1b). This suggests the efficacy prime is a more powerful counterforce against

<sup>4</sup>N per condition: (1) 28 respondents; (2) 45 respondents; (3) 33 respondents; (4) 40 respondents; (5) 32 respondents; (6) 37 respondents; (7) 35 respondents; (8) 40 respondents; (9) 32 respondents; and (10) 32 respondents.

<sup>5</sup>Two additional treatment groups received only one basic prime in isolation to ensure that this basic priming technique has significant effects on policy preferences in noncompetitive settings. These findings were strongly supported by the data. 1

FIGURE 1 Opinion on Social Services Spending: Hypotheses 1a and 1b



Note: Dotted lines represent 95% confidence intervals. All significance tests are one-tailed. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

a competing threat than was the basic prime, but it still cannot overcome the power of a threat.

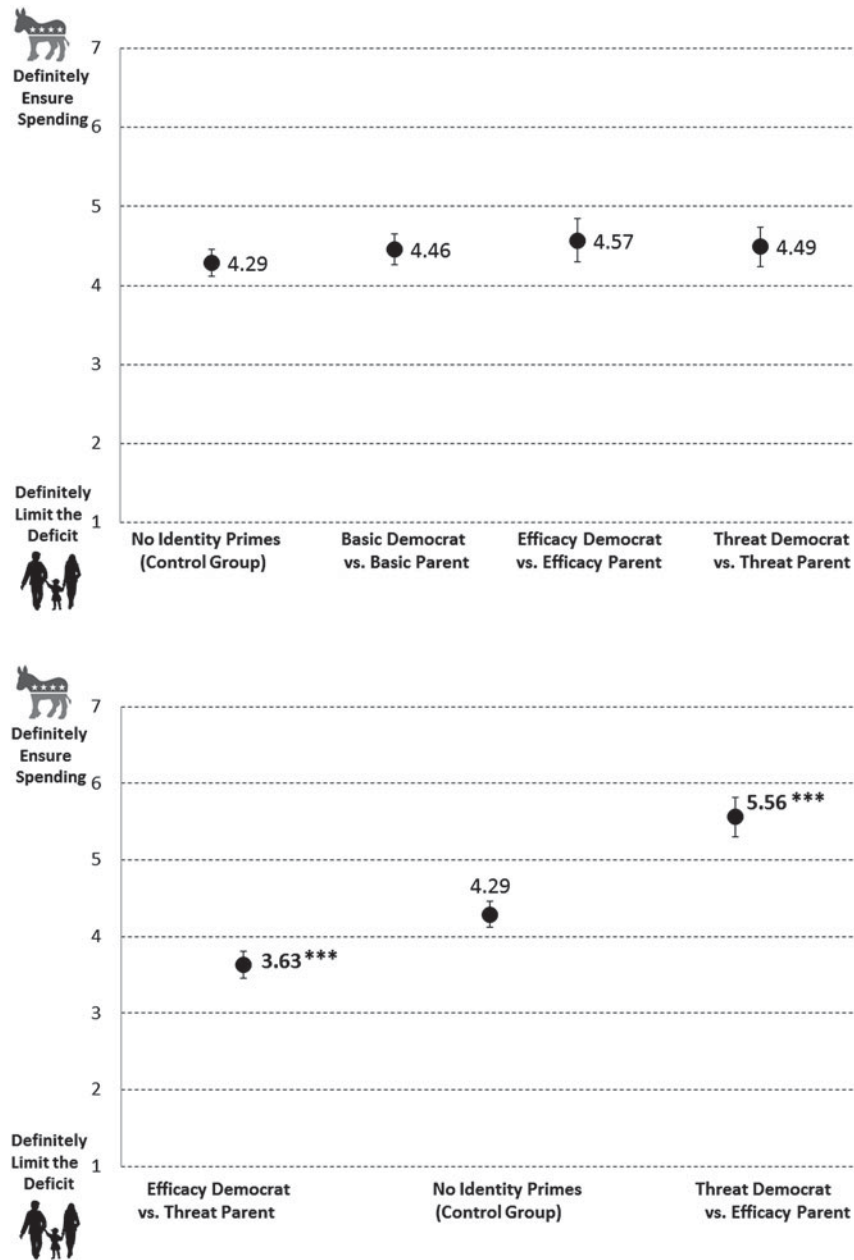
**Federal Spending on Anti-Terrorism.** The second dependent variable addressed attitude toward anti-terrorism spending. Results are shown in Figures 3 and 4.

Support for Hypothesis 1 is weaker in this case, as efficacy targeting parents coupled with a basic mention of Democrats moves policy preference in the

correct direction, though not statistically significantly so (see top panel of Figure 3). An efficacy prime targeting Democrats coupled with a basic mention of parents, however, leads to a significant move in the right direction. Hypothesis 1b is strongly supported. A threat to parents coupled with a mention of Democrats causes a significant shift toward “definitely increase” (4.69), and a threat to Democrats coupled with a mention of parents significantly moves opinion toward



FIGURE 2 Opinion on Social Services Spending: Hypotheses 2 and 3



Note: Dotted lines represent 95% confidence intervals. All significance tests are one-tailed. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

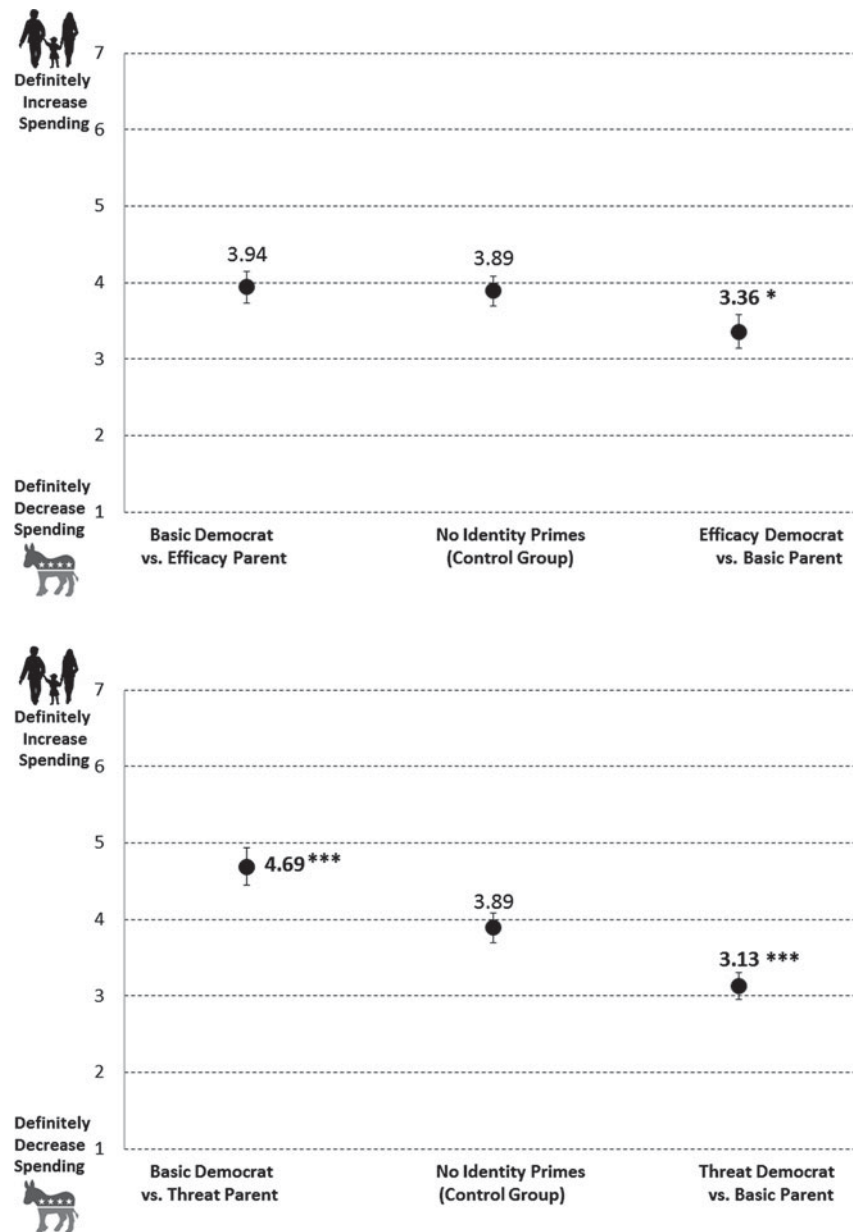
“definitely decrease” (3.13) (bottom panel of Figure 3). Hypothesis 2 is also supported in this case (see top of Figure 4). Whenever two identity primes of equal strength are simultaneously used on two competing identities, there is no significant movement from the control group.

Finally, my third hypothesis is strongly supported (see bottom of Figure 4). A threat is always a powerful opinion mover; when threat is applied against parents, while an efficacy prime targeting Democrats, opinion

shifts highly significantly ( $p < 0.001$ ) toward “definitely increase spending” (4.44). The converse (a threat against Democrats with an efficacy prime targeting parents) causes a highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) move downward toward “definitely decrease spending” (2.71).

**Prison Sentencing.** Finally, Figure 5 and 6 show results for the question on sex-offender sentencing. In this case, the threat prime significantly ( $p < 0.01$ ) moves opinion when in tandem with a parent

FIGURE 3 Opinion on Anti-Terrorism Spending: Hypotheses 1a and 1b



Note: Dotted lines represent 95% confidence intervals. All significance tests are one-tailed. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

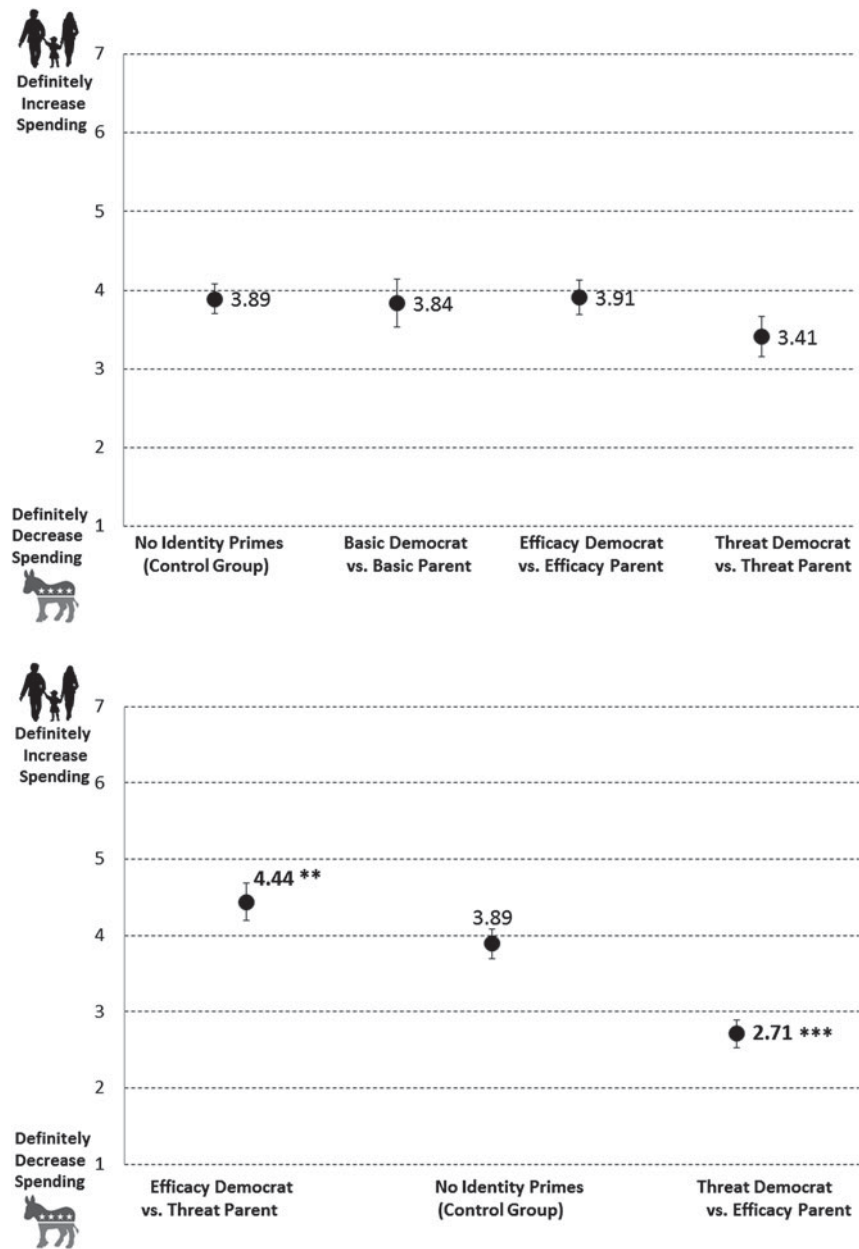
mention (4.85 when threat is against Democrats, and 2.84 when threat is against parents). The efficacy prime, however, moves opinion in the expected direction but not far enough to reach statistical significance, providing only weak support for Hypothesis 1 (see Figure 5).

Figure 6 shows strong support for Hypothesis 2. Neither the combination of two mentions, two efficacy primes, nor the combination of threats

has any impact on opinion. These data also show strong support for Hypothesis 3 (bottom panel of Figure 6). When one identity is threatened and the other is subject to an efficacy prime, the threatened identity significantly influences opinion—regardless of whether that threatened identity is the parent identity or the Democrat identity.

In sum, all hypotheses were supported when it comes to Social Services Spending. The second issue,

FIGURE 4 Opinion on Anti-Terrorism Spending: Hypotheses 2 and 3



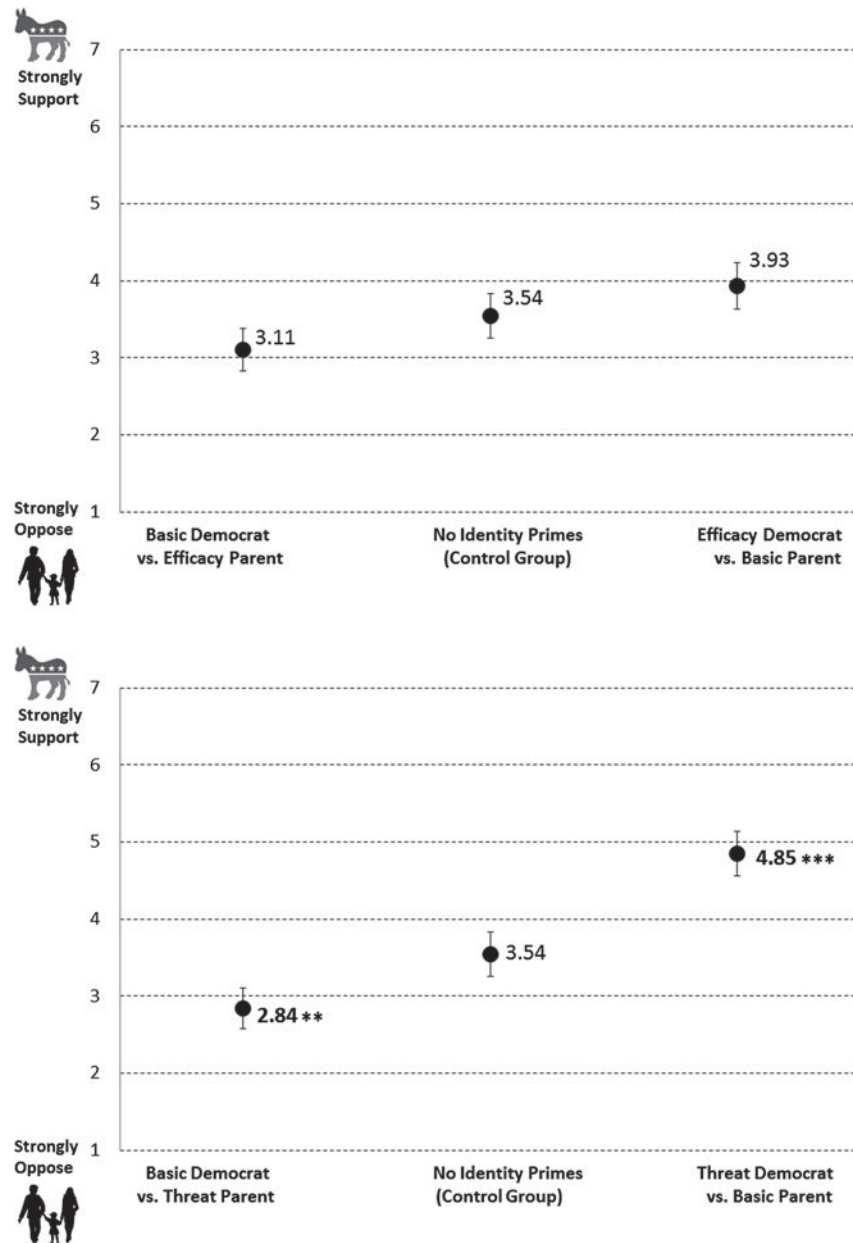
Note: Dotted lines represent 95% confidence intervals. All significance tests are one-tailed. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Anti-Terrorism Spending, showed strong support for all hypotheses, with the exception of Hypothesis 1a. When an efficacy prime used to target Democrats was coupled with a basic mention of being a parent, there was significant movement in favor of the Democratic interest. However, this same tactic in reverse (i.e., an efficacy prime targeting parents coupled with a basic mention of being a Democrat) did not cause a statistically significant move in favor of the parental interest. This could be that anti-terrorism spending is an issue that resonates much more as a partisan issue

than as a parental concern. Therefore, the strength of the threat prime was required to persuade parents to focus on their concerns enough to express a preference for spending (see Hypothesis 1b and Hypothesis 3).

Regarding prison reform, all hypotheses were strongly supported with the exception of Hypothesis 1a. In this case, Hypothesis 1a received no support, showing that an efficacy prime coupled with a basic prime result in no significant change at all, regardless of which identity receives which prime. It could be that the two primes are close enough in

FIGURE 5 Opinion on Prison Sentencing: Hypotheses 1a and 1b



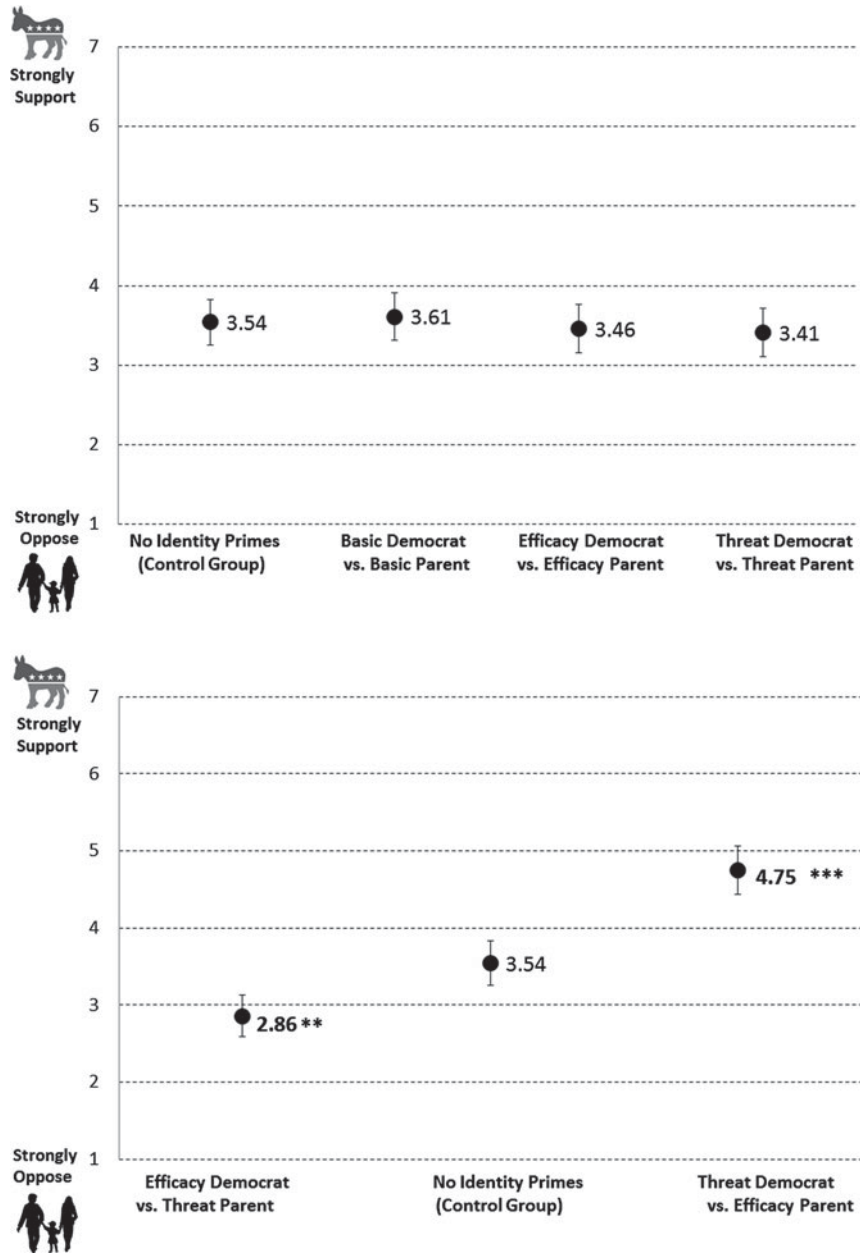
Note: Dotted lines represent 95% confidence intervals. All significance tests are one-tailed. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

strength that they cancel one another out in certain scenarios, or perhaps there was not an obvious connection between either of the identity groups to the issue of prisoner reform. Although Democrats have historically embraced prison reform, it has recently become a more salient issue for candidates on both sides of the aisle (see, e.g., Suellentrop 2006). Aside from Hypothesis 1a, all other hypotheses were strongly supported across all three issues, demonstrating robustness of these experimental findings across a variety of public policy issues.

### Additional Tests

A second study was carried out to affirm (1) the relative strength of each of the three primes (basic, efficacy, and threat) when compared in isolation and (2) the emotions invoked by each of these three primes. To assess the strength of the primes, I randomly divided the sample into three treatment groups and administered only one prime (basic, efficacy, or threatening) to each group. I then asked all respondents to rate the importance of the primed

FIGURE 6 Opinion on Prison Sentencing: Hypotheses 2 and 3



Note: Dotted lines represent 95% confidence intervals. All significance tests are one-tailed. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

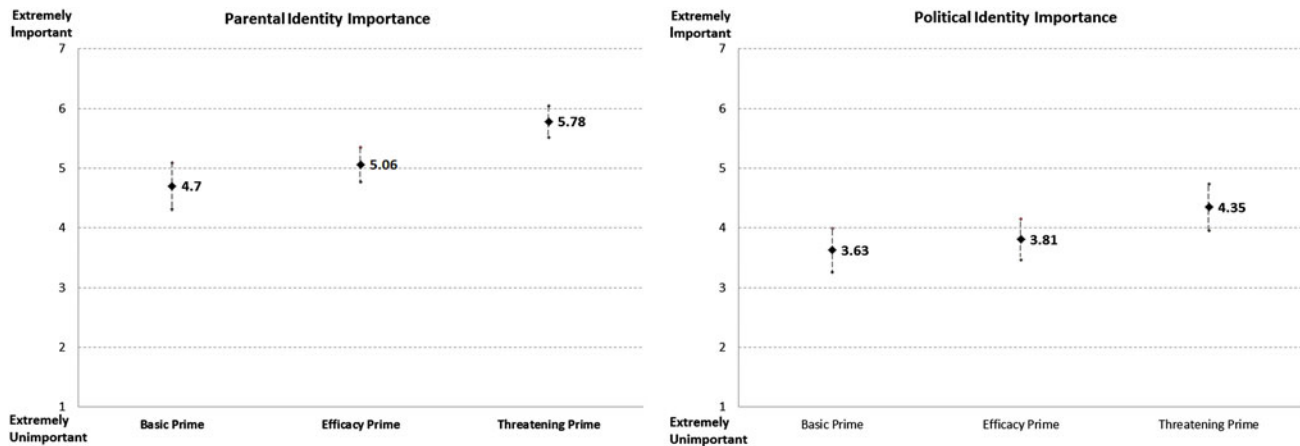
identity on their political decisions. (For complete wording and details, see the online appendix.)

Those who received the threat prime targeting their parent identity reported that being a parent is significantly more important (5.78) than did those who received the efficacy prime (5.06) or the basic mention (4.70) (see left panel of Figure 7). Respondents who received the threat prime targeting their Democratic identity reported that being a Democrat is significantly more important (4.35) than did those who received the efficacy prime (3.81) or the basic mention (3.63) (see

the right panel of Figure 7). My results demonstrate that the basic prime is least effective, the efficacy prime is more effective, and the threat is the most effective prime.

With respect to the mechanisms behind each prime, the “efficacy” prime is presumed to increase an individual’s sense of efficacy by invoking a connection between a group’s interest and policy responsiveness. The “threat” prime is presumed to increase anxiety among individuals—an emotion we know to be a highly persuasive force. Without additional empirical evidence, however, these presumptions are just that

FIGURE 7 The Influence of Primes on Identity Importance:



Note: For the left panel, the question wording was “How important is *being a parent* when you make decisions about which policies to support?” For the right panel, the question wording was “How important is your *political identity* when you make decisions about which policies to support?” Dotted lines indicate 95% confidence intervals.

and no more. To better understand the psychological processes that underlie each of these primes, I designed one additional survey experiment that could allow me to, first, check the relative strength of these primes in isolation and, second, compare the emotional responses invoked by each identity prime.

I randomly assigned individual respondents to three experimental conditions: one in which the parent identity and Democratic identity were targeted with a basic mention; one in which the two identities were targeted with an efficacy prime; and one in which the two identities were targeted with a threat prime. To address the issue of whether the “threat” prime increases anxiety as opposed to anger (two distinct emotional processes), following the primes, respondents reported the level of anger and the level of worry they feel when considering each identity while making political decisions. To explore the “efficacy” prime, respondents also reported the extent to which they believe the government responds to voters like them. Figure 8 displays the respondents’ reactions to receiving the prime targeted at their identity as a parent (top panel) and as a Democrat (bottom panel).

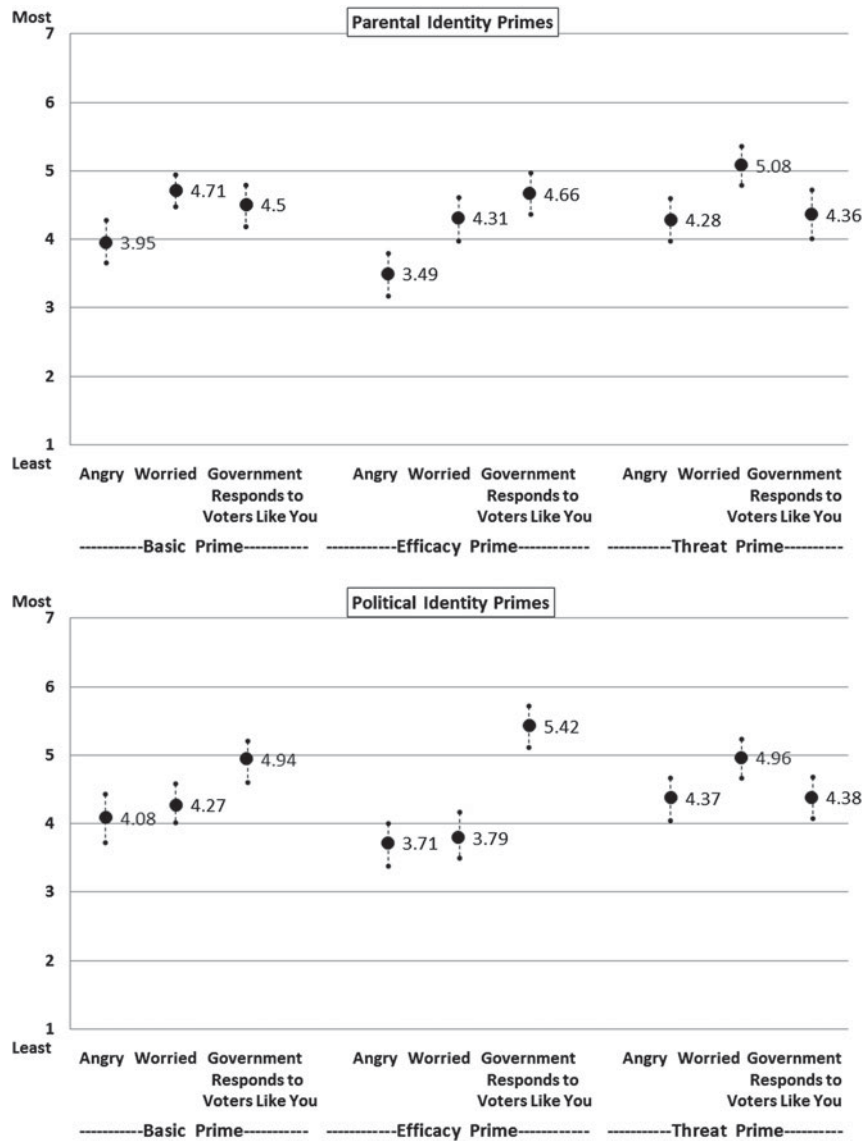
Along the x-axis, I show those who received the basic mention, the efficacy prime, and the threatening prime. Within each group, the graph displays responses to the three questions respondents answered: “When you make decisions about which policies to support, how much do your concerns as a parent make you feel angry?”; “. . . how much do your concerns as a parent make you feel worried?”; and “. . . how much do your concerns as a parent make you feel the government responds to voters like you?” Along the y-axis is the response scale, where 1 indicates

the lowest level of anger, worry, and efficacy, and 7 indicates the highest.

Across the three treatment groups, those receiving the basic mention were not the most likely to report any of the three responses. Those individuals primed with the efficacy prime were most likely to report a sense that government responds to them, although these differences are not statistically significant at a conventional level (compared to the threat prime group,  $p = 0.12$ ). Those who received the efficacy prime were less likely to report feeling angry or worried. Individuals primed with threat were no more likely to report either a sense of efficacy or a sense of anger, but they did report substantially higher levels of worry.

When respondents received the three primes targeting the Democratic identity, the efficacy prime led to higher levels of government responsiveness (5.42)—significantly ( $p < 0.02$ ) higher than those primed with a basic mention (4.94) and significantly ( $p < 0.001$ ) higher than those primed with threat. The threat prime led to indistinguishable levels of efficacy and anger, but worry was significantly higher for those who received threat (4.96) than for either of the other two experimental groups. These data provide some additional insight in the mechanisms underlying the dominance of threat I find in competitive identity priming. The threatening prime appears to increase worry, or anxiety, among my respondents, while the efficacy prime increases the sense that government responds to one’s identity group. Existing literature effectively demonstrates that both these forces can be powerful identity primes in isolated settings, but this study demonstrates the dominance of threat when competition is a factor.

FIGURE 8 Emotions Evoked by Identity Primes



Note: The wording for the parental primes (on the top panel) was: “When you make decisions about which policies to support, how much do your concerns as a parent make you feel ....?” The wording for the Democratic primes (on the bottom panel) was: “When you make decisions about which policies to support, how much do your political identification make you feel ....?” Dotted lines indicate 95% intervals.

### Conclusions

I am able to demonstrate that the perceived strength of the identity prime determines its influence in a competitive setting and across an array of issues. The first, social services spending, is an issue Democrats commonly support. The second, national security spending, is an issue Democrats tend to oppose. And the third, prison sentences for sex offenders, is a nonfiscal issue with no partisan ownership. Yet, despite the differences across these three issues, the same pattern of competitive

identity priming holds. Simply mentioning an identity group does not influence policy preference when a competing identity is also primed using either an efficacy prime or a threatening prime. I demonstrate that two identity primes in competition become mutually ineffective if they are of equal strength. Finally, I show that in a situation in which two competing identities are primed with an efficacy prime on one side and a threat on the other, the threatened prime provides an insurmountable counterweight to the efficacy prime and subsequently influences policy preference.

Citizens who face an identity threat that competes with their partisanship may express preferences that appear to deviate from their reported partisan identity. Thus, we can conclude from this study that one cannot rely upon an identity—even partisanship—to guide preference formation without considering the possible competing identities that citizens may also be weighing. Identity competition is indeed the norm for the majority of Americans whose identity groups crosscut one another and, at times, conflict head on. It is thus crucial to apply studies of identity-based preference formation to the competitive settings in which they so frequently exist.

## Discussion

As with any experimental stimuli, there are limitations inherent to the treatments in this study. To begin with, the *efficacy prime* can be reconstructed to highlight several distinct elements: either external or internal efficacy, trust in government, or specific links between identity-based interests and policies. The wording used in this study is a conservative measure of efficacy, but stronger language may lead an efficacy prime to fare better when facing a competing threat. The threatening prime also may have different influences over identity-based preferences depending on how credible the threat. In this study, both groups appeared to sustain credible threat against them, since the prime was effective in every competitive scenario. But one might imagine situations in which threat is not a credible influence—or, when threat against one group is distinctly *more* credible than against another. Measuring the perceived threat against two groups in competition could help gauge the influence of this prime over preferences.

The emotions triggered by the identity primes themselves also may be subject to variation in future research. For example, Miller and Krosnick (2004) investigate the behavioral implications of invoking threat or opportunity, whereas Valentino et al. (2011) find that anger is uniquely powerful. The influence of these various stimuli on preference formation in competitive settings should be addressed in future work. As with experiments broadly, this one must be replicated in other settings with different populations to know how identity primes comingle in different arenas. One might suspect that an identity facing more consistent threat—for example, an oft-persecuted ethnic minority—may exert stronger weight when coupled with a less threatened affiliation.

One noticeable result that comes out of these data is the slightly stronger effects of the Democratic identity over preferences than the parental identity.

Given the presumed importance of the parental identity, this may be surprising to some readers. Recall, however, that this survey is administered via an exit poll. Respondents are participating in this study in a highly political setting, after performing perhaps the most political act in which a citizen can engage: voting. That the parental identity overwhelms the partisan identity at all in such a setting may, upon reflection, seem most surprising. Speculation, however, of how important these identities are in competition should only give way to further experimentation. There are certainly issues of keen relevance to parents—say, prekindergarten education or child vaccines—that might be influenced most by the parental identity, regardless of competing identity-based interests. How the relevance of an identity to a specific issue changes that identity's influence in competitive settings is a topic that merits additional work.

A related consideration when designing experiments that build upon this work is to consider the precise wording of the primes. In this experiment, the primes refer to parental “concerns” and to political “principles.” The wording between the two primes is close but is not precisely identical, and it may be worth testing how political preferences may be differentially influenced by references to “concerns” as opposed to “principles.” Given that respondents in this study received both the parental and political primes sequentially, distinguishing the question wording so as to reduce parallelism seemed to be the best technique, as a matter of design. Testing alternative wording in future work may, however, provide some more insight into how these specific primes influence preference formation.

One also wonders how long these priming effects last, given that effects of framing decay over time (Chong and Druckman 2010). These primes may have a similarly short-lived effect, but how do repeated messages influence lasting preference formation? These questions, and others, stem from the conclusions this experiment provides. As voters themselves become increasingly diverse and thus susceptible to competing identity primes from both sides of nearly any policy debate, this avenue of research will allow us to better understand their preferences for how our democratic society should operate.

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