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Elite Polarization and Public Opinion: How Polarization Is Communicated and Its Effects

JOSHUA ROBISON and KEVIN J. MULLINIX

Elite polarization has reshaped American politics and is an increasingly salient aspect of news coverage within the United States. As a consequence, a burgeoning body of research attempts to unravel the effects of elite polarization on the mass public. However, we know very little about how *polarization is communicated to the public by news media. We report the results of one of the first content analyses to delve into the nature of news coverage of elite polarization. We show that such coverage is predominantly critical of polarization. Moreover, we show that unlike coverage of politics focused on individual politicians, coverage of elite polarization principally frames partisan divisions as rooted in the values of the parties rather than strategic concerns. We build on these novel findings with two survey experiments exploring the influence of these features of polarization news coverage on public attitudes. In our first study, we show that criticism of polarization leads partisans to more positively evaluate the argument offered by their non-preferred party, increases support for bi-partisanship, but ultimately does not change the extent to which partisans follow their party's policy endorsements. In our second study, we show that Independents report significantly less political interest, trust, and efficacy when polarization is made salient and this is particularly evident when a cause of polarization is mentioned. These studies have important implications for our understanding of the consequences of elite polarization—and how polarization is communicated—for public opinion and political behavior in democratic politics.*

Keywords elite polarization, framing, motivated reasoning, political interest, political trust

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Party competition is an integral feature of a healthy democracy (Dahl, 1971). Importantly, the nature of party competition in the United States has changed dramatically over the past four decades. Democratic and Republican party elites have *polarized*—that is, they have grown more ideologically distant from each other and more internally homogeneous (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006; Theriault, 2008). Elite polarization has had important consequences for the partisan identities, voting behavior, and policy preferences of the mass public (Abramowitz, 2010; Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013; Hetherington, 2001; Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Layman & Carsey, 2002). As such, polarization has reshaped American politics.

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Befitting its important place in American politics, elite polarization is an increasingly salient aspect of news coverage (Levendusky, 2009). However, we know very little about *how* polarization is communicated to the public by news media. This is important because an extensive literature shows that the influence of an event or issue on the mass public depends critically on how it is framed by news media (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Elenbaas & de Vreese, 2008; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997). "Framing entails selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues . . . so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution" (Entman, 2003, p. 417). News frames thus help "organize everyday reality" for citizens by reducing the complex buzz of the social world into a more understandable narrative concerning why a problem exists and its potential solution(s) (Tuchman, 1978, p. 193). In order to more fully understand the influence of elite polarization on the mass public, we must therefore investigate how polarization is actually communicated by the news media and concomitantly how specific aspects of this portrayal influence public reactions.

We report results from three related studies. First, we conduct a content analysis of news coverage of elite polarization in the *New York Times*. We show that news from this influential source is predominantly critical of polarization. Moreover, we show that this coverage principally frames the cause of polarization as being rooted in the values of the parties rather than their strategic incentives. The results of our content analysis motivate two experiments that isolate the consequences of the framing of polarization for the mass public. In the first experiment we vary the presence and source of criticisms of elite polarization to explore how frames that heighten negative considerations of polarization influence partisan-motivated reasoning (Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). Notably, we find that criticism of polarization leads people to more positively evaluate the argument offered by their non-preferred party, increases support for bipartisanship, but ultimately does not change the extent to which partisans follow their party's policy endorsements. In our second experiment we vary the salience of polarization and the causes attributed to it in order to investigate how framing the cause of polarization influences attitudes toward government and politics. We show that when polarization is salient, Independents report significantly less political interest, trust, and efficacy and that this appears to occur particularly when a cause is mentioned.

We structure the remainder of this article as follows. We first theorize how the framing of elite polarization shapes preference formation and attitudes. We next discuss our content analysis of how polarization is communicated to the public. Building on this analysis, we present two experiments. Our key conclusion is that the consequences of elite polarization are often contingent on the manner in which partisan divisions are communicated to the public.

The Consequences of Polarization and How It Is Communicated

Citizens learn about elite partisan polarization, and politics more generally, through media reports.[1] Yet, party divisions may be communicated to the public in varying ways with important consequences for opinion and behavior. We approach the question of how the news communicates polarization through the theoretical lens of framing (for a review, see Chong & Druckman, 2007b). Framing entails the promotion of a particular interpretation of an event or issue with the frame thereby affecting the importance and salience of different considerations when evaluating the topic. News frames tend to highlight four critical elements of an issue or event as described by Entman (1993, p. 3; emphasis in original):

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"[T]o frame is to . . . promote a particular *problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation*, and/or *treatment recommendation* for the item described." While decades of framing research focus on how different sides of a political conflict frame an issue, we suggest that *political conflict* itself can be framed in this manner with important consequences for mass-level opinion and behavior. Thus, our core questions are as follows: How does the news tend to frame polarization and, concomitantly, what effect does variation in this portrayal have on important political outcomes?

We focus here on two important elements of this framing process. First, we investigate whether the news identifies polarization as problematic and, if so, what type of solutions they emphasize when discussing this phenomenon. Second, we discuss the media's causal interpretations of polarization. In the following subsections we lay out our expectations for what media coverage will look like and our expectations regarding the influence of these portrayals for two important outcomes: partisan-motivated reasoning and attitudes toward politics and government.

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Framing Polarization as Problematic

Scarce attention has been given to the extent to which elite polarization is framed in a negative manner. Levendusky's (2009) content analysis explores the frequency of discussion of elite polarization in news coverage but not its specific content. Meanwhile, experimental research on the effects of elite polarization for public opinion simply and objectively state whether or not parties in Congress are far apart on an issue (Bolsen et al., 2014; Druckman et al., 2013). Yet, it seems unrealistic that partisan divisions are discussed in news media with such impartiality. Elite partisan polarization in the U.S. context is associated with increased policy gridlock (Binder, 2003; Jones, 2001) and, in recent years, with breakdowns of governmental operations including a shutdown of the federal government and a near default on governmental debt holdings. In other words, there are fairly objective indicators available to journalists and their sources to use in framing polarization as problematic for policymaking. In addition, the rise of elite polarization in the United States has coincided with a shift toward a more interpretative style of news coverage that may embolden the use of a negative tone or critical comments regarding elite actions (Patterson, 1993). We thus expect that media coverage of elite polarization often features a negative tone with explicit criticisms (that is, frame polarization as problematic). We also expect that this portrayal of elite polarization will tend to be accompanied with calls for bipartisanship as a potential solution given that polarization is essentially defined by the *absence* of bipartisanship in the policymaking process. Furthermore, even when political elites are generally polarized on an issue, news media may reference examples of bipartisanship given that much legislation has bipartisan support at different stages of the policy process (Harbridge, n.d.). Individual examples of bipartisanship can thus be used to criticize the inability of the parties as a whole to work together generally.

Contemporary research on the mass-level effects of elite partisan polarization has focused extensively on how it shapes the reasoning processes of citizens and their policy attitudes (Abramowitz, 2010; Bolsen et al., 2014; Druckman et al., 2013; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2008; Layman & Carsey, 2002). In particular, elite polarization entails both clearer policy signals (Levendusky, 2010; Zaller, 1992) and more salient partisan identities for the mass public which may increase the tendency for citizens to engage in *partisan-motivated reasoning* (Bolsen et al., 2014; Dancey & Goren, 2010; Druckman et al., 2013; Price, 1989). Partisan-motivated reasoners seek out information that buttresses their party's policy endorsements (i.e., confirmation bias), counter-argue information that challenges their

party's position (i.e., disconfirmation bias), and in turn, reinforce favorable evaluations of their preferred party and its policy positions (Groenendyk, 2013; Kunda, 1990; Lavine, Johnston, & Steenbergen, 2012; Lodge & Taber, 2006). Thus, existing research asserts that when elite partisan divisions are salient, partisans are more supportive of the position endorsed by their favored party even when buttressed by the weaker argument (Bolsen et al., 2014; Druckman et al., 2013). However, as we noted earlier, these studies have not explored how the media's framing of polarization influences this process; they instead provide objective and neutral information that likely fails to address the manner in which polarization is actually communicated to the public. Thus, we build on this existing literature by asking the following: How might criticisms of polarization alter the effects of polarization for preference formation?

We expect that the following will occur when polarization is framed as problematic (i.e., discussed with a negative tone, criticized, and combined with discussions of bipartisanship as a "solution"). First, we expect to see heightened support for compromise and bipartisanship in such contexts (H1). Americans are not fond of party conflict in general and criticisms of elite polarization may serve to make such worries more accessible, acceptable, and salient (Durr, Gilmour, & Wolbrecht, 1997; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Ramirez, 2009).

Second, we hypothesize that critical accounts of polarization will minimize the influence of partisan-motivated reasoning (H2). Critical framings of polarization may mitigate partisan-motivated reasoning for a couple reasons. First, partisan-motivated reasoning is undermined when partisan endorsements are not perceived to be a reliable shortcut for making "accurate" evaluations (Lavine et al., 2012). Media accounts criticizing polarization likely make negative considerations about political parties and their positions more cognitively accessible, thereby prompting skepticism about the reliability of party cues and a closer evaluation of the merits of competing arguments. Furthermore, criticisms of polarization may also reference some instances of partisan officials working across the aisle, which likely obfuscate the clarity of the party signal, making it more difficult to uncritically follow the party line (Bolsen et al., 2014). If partisans are told all Republicans are on one side of an issue and all Democrats are on the other side (e.g., Druckman et al., 2013) the party cue is clear and strong. However, if partisans are informed of partisan divisions on an issue, but are also told that lawmakers have been and/or should be having meaningful discussions across party lines and finding areas of common ground, the party cues become slightly less clear. If criticisms of polarization reference instances of bipartisanship, this may also signal intra-party disagreement and conflict within one's own party, and such types of conflict are known to increase attention to substantive information (Bolsen et al., 2014; Chong & Druckman, 2007a).

With respect to H2, we expect to observe two empirical results. First, an integral feature of motivated reasoning is the propensity of individuals to counter-argue information that challenges prior attitudes (i.e., disconfirmation bias) which can be assessed by having people rate the effectiveness of arguments for and against a policy (Taber, Cann, & Kucsova, 2009).We hypothesize that criticisms of polarization will mitigate disconfirmation biases and promote more even-handed, and possibly more positive, evaluations of the out-party's argument (H2a). If partisans are more supportive of bipartisanship and more even-handedly evaluate opposing arguments, we would also expect them to indicate less extreme support for their preferred party's policy positions (H2b). That is, critical discussions of polarization will mitigate partisan-motivated reasoning (relative to contexts where such criticism is absent).

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Framing the Cause of Polarization

News frames also powerfully influence reactions to events by identifying the event's *cause*.[2] Iyengar (1991) has shown, for instance, how the varied use of episodic versus thematic frames impacts the types of solutions individuals favor for crime and poverty by shaping perceptions of their causal antecedents. Thus, we also ask the following: How do the media portray the causes of elite polarization and of what consequence does variation in the choice of causal frame have for mass-level responses?

Communication scholars have paid considerable attention to the prevalence of *strategic frames* (i.e., frames that lead readers to believe that elites are motivated by political self-interest) in studies conducted outside of the context of elite partisan polarization (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Lawrence, 2000; Patterson, 1993). Strategic framings of elite actions are a common element of media discourse. Existing research thus suggests that media coverage of polarization is likely to emphasize the strategic incentives of elites. Such frames might stipulate, for instance, that polarization stems from the need for elites to respond to separate bodies of special interests. However, we suspect that a rival type of causal frame, what we refer to as a *value frame*, may also be highly salient in discussions of polarization's origins (Borah, 2013, 2014; Brewer, 2003; Lee, McLeod, & Shah, 2008). Polarization in this framing is born out of the ideological commitments of elite partisans rather than, or perhaps in addition to, their strategic incentives. We suspect that this type of causal frame may be salient in news coverage of polarization given that polarization is defined, in part, by growing ideological distance (McCarty et al., 2006; Noel, 2013). As with criticism, there is thus some actual evidence that can be used by journalists to ground a value framing of polarization. In addition, elites themselves may be prone to offer this type of reason for their disagreements (for an example, see Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 6) as it is a potentially better regarded motivation for elite action than strategic incentives (Doherty, n.d.; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). Rather than polarization resulting from the cynical efforts of elites, value frames potentially suggest that politics is imbued with a more sincere purpose.

A core focus of work on causal frames in political communications focuses on their influence on attitudes toward government and politics (i.e., trust in government, external efficacy, and political interest; Borah, 2013; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; de Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Pedersen, 2012; Schuck, Boomgaarden, & de Vreese, 2013; Shehata, 2014; Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001). For this reason we focus our attention on these outcomes when explicating the potential consequences of variation in media portrayals of the causes of polarization. Focusing on these outcomes also allows us to contribute to the broader literature on the effects of elite polarization as this literature has given them relatively less attention than processes such as preference formation. Moreover, existing work primarily relies on observational data, making it difficult to draw firm causal claims and dismiss alternative hypotheses (Abramowitz, 2010; Hetherington, 2008; King, 1997; Mason, 2015; Rogowski, 2014).

We expect that individuals who do not identify with the party in power (i.e., Republicans and Independents) at the time of the experiment described next will react negatively to polarization when it is framed as strategically caused. While individuals may be generally prone to seeing self-interest as a motivator of actions (Miller, 1999), this motivation is negatively valenced in the context of politics (i.e., disapproved of [Doherty, n.d.]). Framing elite actions as strategically motivated thus makes negative considerations of politicians and the political system salient in the minds of the exposed. However, when it comes to evaluating government individuals who identify with the party in charge may be motivated to dismiss this information as a way to avoid negatively evaluating co-partisans

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(as in McGraw, Lodge, & Jones, 2002; Munro, Weih, & Tsai, 2010). In our context, Republicans and Independents, unlike Democrats, do not have a motivational counterweight to the strategic frame and may thus be more prone to accept it when considering the trustworthiness of the current government. Our expectations on this front are thus consistent with the broader literature on strategic frames where exposure has been consistently linked to reduced trust and efficacy (Borah, 2014; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Pedersen, 2012; Schuck et al., 2013). With regards to political interest, we principally expect to see a negative reaction among Independents, which would again be consistent with prior evidence (e.g., Valentino et al., 2001). In such a context, Republican identifiers may be able to rely on their salient 'tribal loyalties' (Kam & Utych, 2011) to sustain their motivation to be engaged in politics. Independents, on the other hand, do not have the same identity-based resource to help sustain their motivation to be politically engaged in the presence of such negative evaluations. Thus, our formal hypothesis here is that framing polarization as caused by the strategic motives of elites will lead to negative evaluations of government among those who do not identify with the party in charge (i.e., Republicans and Independents) and reduced interest among Independents (H3).

In the domain of elite politics, strategic motives are negatively valenced while values-related motives are positively valenced (Doherty, n.d.). Media accounts that frame polarization as caused by values may therefore lead to the presence of salient positive considerations when individuals consider politics and government. Unlike politicians catering to strategic incentives, value causal frames suggest that politicians care about the common good and are motivated to pursue their conceptualization of the public welfare. This may imbue politics with greater meaning and thus motivate interest as politics becomes something other than a game. In turn, this may generate positive evaluations of government and politics relative to either polarization absent a cause or polarization as caused by strategic motives. This possibility is congruent with the still small literature on the effects of value frames on these outcomes (Borah, 2013, 2014; Gangl, 2003). However, it may be that value-based accounts of elite polarization will not have this effect. Lee and colleagues (2008), for instance, argue that value frames strengthen the influence of ideological reasoning in the policy reasoning process. In this context value frames might simply strengthen existing dispositions to see the other side as villains and members of the in-party as saints (Doherty, n.d.; Munro et al., 2010). Furthermore, elites motivated by their core values may be perceived as less likely to compromise, which would suggest a negative effect for trust and efficacy. There are thus some logical reasons to expect either a positive or negative effect with regards to value frames. Ultimately, we follow the extant literature and suggest that value-based accounts of polarization will lead to more positive evaluations (H4), although we note that we are less certain regarding our priors on this front given the lack of prior studies/evidence.

How Polarization is Communicated to the Public

Before testing our hypotheses, it is imperative that we first assess whether or not media actually frame elite partisan polarization in the ways just described. Although polarization is discussed across various news sources, we focus on the *New York Times*. The *Times* is "regarded as the national newspaper of record in the United States and an agenda-setter for other newspapers and mass media" (Chong & Druckman, 2011, p. 249). And while the *Times* is not fully representative of the wide array of news outlets that provide coverage of political polarization, the *Times* often sets the agenda for other newspapers, influences how other outlets frame politics (Entman, 2003), and is consequentially the frequent topic of

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content analyses (e.g., Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005; Boydstun, 2013; Patterson, 1993; Stömbäck & Dimitrova, 2006). To our knowledge, this is the first content analysis to directly explore the framing of elite polarization, and as such, we see the *Times* as an appropriate starting point.

Specifically, we used a keyword search on LexisNexis to identify more than 900 articles published in the *Times* during the years 2006–2013 in which elite polarization was referenced.[3] We then randomly selected 250 of these articles for analysis by two coders. Our coders recorded several elements of these articles, including the tone with which polarization was discussed, whether polarization was criticized and by whom, whether there were appeals for bipartisanship, and the particular causes that the article might attribute to polarization's existence. The Supplemental Material provides further details concerning how articles were sampled, coder instructions, and inter-coder reliability; we note here that the two coders did not significantly differ in how they coded the features of news coverage discussed here.

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Content Analysis Results

We find that the *Times* rarely discusses elite polarization impartially. Rather, the vast majority (87.30%) of stories were coded as having a negative tone. Articles with a negative tone were subsequently coded on a 1 (only a little negative) to 5 (extremely negative) scale; the average for these articles was a 2.98, indicating that the portrait of polarization offered by the *Times* is at least "somewhat negative" (a 3 on our scale). Our coders also reported whether polarization was criticized in the article and, if so, by whom. These criticisms were largely rooted in concerns that elite polarization leads to political gridlock, a lack of compromise, and negative consequences for policymaking.[4] The most common source of criticism of elite polarization was the author of the article (82.05%), but criticisms were also found in statements from lawmakers and staff members (12.82%). Other criticisms were attributed to nonpartisan experts, political organizations, and ordinary citizens.

If polarization is often criticized for being "bad" for policymaking, we might also ask if news coverage of elite divisions contains appeals for bipartisanship and compromise. Our analysis revealed that more than half of the articles (54.92%) contained an appeal—either from the author or a quoted source—for party elites to compromise and engage in bipartisan policymaking. We also assessed whether the articles referenced any examples or discussion of party elites engaging in bipartisanship. This differs from appeals for bipartisanship in that this refers to what has *actually* happened rather than calls for what *should* happen. We find that 47.95% of the articles reference examples of bipartisan behavior.

Our coders next recorded whether the *Times* explicitly attributed one (or more) of the following causes to elite polarization: differences in values/ideology, the influence of special interests, the need to be responsive to voters, whether the Democratic and/or Republican party was to blame, or another cause.[5] Our coders were also able to indicate whether no cause was offered by the *Times* article and whether multiple causes were discussed. What is particularly notable from this exercise is the substantial use of the values frame, especially in relation to the explicitly strategic explanations of responsiveness to voters and special interests. A total of 32.7% of all stories included a values attribution, making it the most popular single option. Differences in values were more commonly invoked as an explanation when the story concerned polarization on a specific issue (45.1% of such stories) than in stories covering broad-based polarization (24.6% of such stories). However, even this latter number far outpaces the proportion of total studies invoking special interests (1.6%) or responsiveness to voters (1.2%) as a/the cause of polarization. Discussion of

polarization, at least in the *Times*, is thus heavily imbued with the language of value differences with a smaller focus on strategic considerations than existing work on news framing would suggest.[6]

There are two important things to note about the results of our content analysis. First, polarization is often discussed with a negative tone and criticized as an impediment to good policymaking. Related to this, when polarization is discussed, there are often appeals for, and examples of, bipartisanship. Second, values are a predominant component of the causal narrative imparted to the mass public concerning this political phenomenon. We build on these results with two survey experiments aimed at assessing the consequences of these communication choices.

Study 1: Polarization and Preference Formation

To test whether framing polarization as problematic mitigates partisan-motivated reasoning (H1, H2a, and H2b), we implemented a survey experiment focused on elite partisan polarization and the DREAM Act, a piece of legislation that would allow undocumented immigrants to gain citizenship if certain criteria are met. We selected the DREAM Act, in part, because it was used in prior analyses of elite polarization and partisan-motivated reasoning (Druckman et al., 2013). We can thus ask whether the negative tone with which polarization is communicated to the public—that has been ignored in previous research—can mitigate partisan motivations on the exact same issue on which the effects of polarization have been previously demonstrated.

The study was implemented with a sample of 687 university undergraduate students during the 2012–2013 academic year. The Supplemental Material shows the sample demographics. While concerns about the generalizability of experiments implemented with university undergraduates are often cited (e.g., Sears, 1986), a study on partisan endorsements and the DREAM Act directly compared treatment effect estimates between student-based and population-based survey samples and found no difference (Leeper & Mullinix, 2014). We are thus confident that our results are externally valid.

We randomly assigned study participants across seven conditions where we varied the presence or absence of statements criticizing polarization and the source of these criticisms (if present). All participants received background information concerning the DREAM Act, in the form of a news article excerpt that indicated that the parties are generally polarized and included balanced arguments for and against the policy.[7] We provided the first experimental group (Control) with party endorsements (i.e., Democrats in Congress tend to support the DREAM Act and Republicans tend to oppose it) alongside the background information just described. Participants in five experimental conditions read the exact same information, but *also* read an additional statement that criticized polarization, discussed elite divisions with a negative tone, and made appeals for compromise, with the source of the criticism varying across the five treatment groups. A seventh group was included as a point of comparison and received the same information as Control (issue background, polarization mentioned but not discussed in a negative tone), but did *not* receive party endorsements. This seventh group can be directly compared to Control because they differ only with respect to the presence or absence of party endorsements; this comparison is consistent with traditional tests of partisan-motivated reasoning. Given that the primary treatment of interest is the novel introduction of criticism into studies of partisan-motivated reasoning, we next discuss the specific nature of this treatment in greater detail.[8]

Individuals in the five treatment conditions receiving a criticism of elite polarization and an appeal for compromise read statements that built off insights from our content

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analysis. Specifically, the treatment information included the following statements: "It is imperative that both parties come together, make compromises, and find a solution to this critical issue . . . and that we avoid partisan bickering. . . . The ideal solution will most likely not come from one side or the other, but rather in the form of legislation that is co-sponsored by both parties and is the result of negotiations and compromises." We varied the source of this additional information across these conditions to reflect the reality that these types of statements stem from various sources and because the perceived credibility of a message source can powerfully influence audience receptiveness to its content (Druckman, 2001; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). In particular, we selected five sources: a nonpartisan expert, a Democratic party elite, a Republican party elite, informed citizens, and public opinion (as reflected in support for these types of statements); see the Supplemental Material for specific treatment wordings. Pre-tests reveal predictable differences in the perceived credibility of the sources. The nonpartisan expert was viewed as the most credible, followed by informed citizens and a party elite from one's preferred party, and public opinion and opposing party elites were seen as less credible.[9] Pre-tests also reveal that the stimuli were perceived as both neutral and fair with regards to the issue.[10]

Consistent with the literature on partisan-motivated reasoning, we break down the results by partisanship unless otherwise noted. However, including partisan leaners, our sample is 65.03% Democratic and only 19.58% Republican. As such, in-text analyses mostly focus on Democratic respondents since the Republican sample provides insufficient statistical power to test hypotheses. Results for Republicans and the full sample are shown in the Supplemental Material. Hypotheses are tested using difference of means t-tests between each treatment group and the control group.[11]

Results

We first test whether people will be more supportive of bipartisanship when polarization is framed as problematic (H1). Democratic respondents were asked, "If Congress were to pass a law on an immigration issue like the DREAM Act, how important do you think it is that Congress comes up with a bipartisan piece of legislation (something both parties agree on)?" (1 = "not too important," 4 = "moderately important," and 7 = "extremely important").[12] The mean importance, by experimental condition, attributed to a bipartisan approach to the DREAM Act is shown in Figure 1, A. At baseline, people attribute above-moderate levels of importance to bipartisanship (Control M = 4.63 [SE = 0.18]), a finding consistent with existing survey research (Harbridge, Malhotra, & Harrison, 2014). As expected, we see no difference between the two conditions that did not receive a criticism of elite polarization (Control versus No Party Cues, $p < .617$). Consistent with expectations, and across all treatment groups, when polarization is framed as problematic and is criticized there is an increase in the importance of bipartisanship relative to the control group with all differences significant at $p < .05$ (and most significant at $p < .01$).[13] As expected, the most substantial increases in the importance of bipartisanship are evident when the statement was attributed to highly credible sources—the nonpartisan expert and concerned citizens—although importance of bipartisanship among these Democratic respondents even increased by more than one point when the source was a Republican ($M = 5.68$ versus $M_{\text{control}} = 4.63$). It appears that partisans are not implacable opponents of compromise but are responsive to messages highlighting its desirability.

We also expect that criticizing elite polarization will attenuate partisan-motivated reasoning. If this is the case, then we would expect to see less disconfirmation bias and counter-arguing of messages from the opposing party. As such, Democrats should more

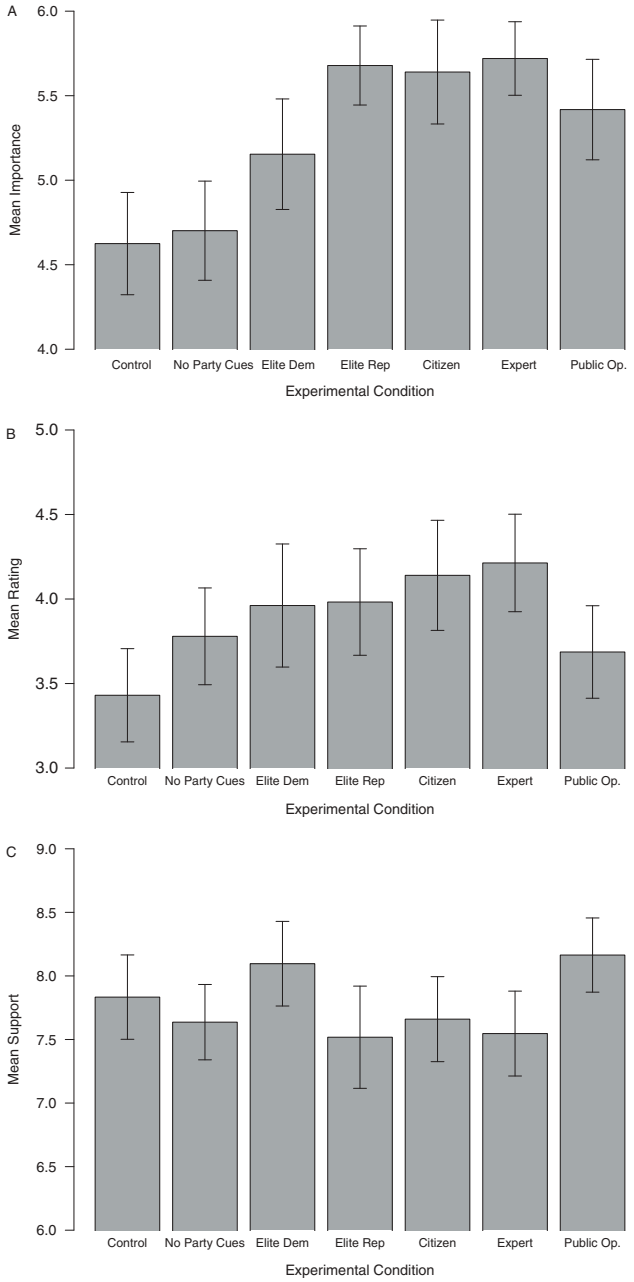

Figure 1. The effects of media criticism on the importance of bipartisanship, message evaluation, and policy support (Study 1).

positively evaluate the Republican argument against the DREAM Act when criticisms of polarization are present than when they are absent (H2a). To address this, we asked Democrats, "How effective or ineffective did you find the main argument opposed to the DREAM Act?" (1 = "very ineffective," 7 = "very effective"); results are provided

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in Figure 1, B.[14] Save for the public opinion criticism condition, each of the criticism treatments significantly increased the perceived effectiveness of the opposing party's argument relative to control (Elite Democrat, $p < .027$; Elite Republican, $p < .016$; Informed Citizens, $p < .004$; Expert, $p < .001$; Public Opinion, $p < .141$).[15] These effects are substantially large; for instance, respondents' average rating of the opposing party's argument in control is 3.43 (0.17), but the average is 4.21 (0.18) when polarization is criticized by a nonpartisan expert. This is a notable result given that disconfirmation biases appear to be the norm (Lodge & Taber, 2006) and strengthened by elite polarization (Druckman et al., 2013). However, prior studies have not included criticisms in their design and thus are silent on how this common component of media accounts concerning polarization dramatically alters how partisans evaluate political messages. Our results suggest that this silence is problematic.

Discussing polarization with a critical frame increases support for bipartisanship and attenuates disconfirmation biases, but do these effects translate to less partisan policy preferences (i.e., less support among Democrats) as we expected in H2b? Respondents were asked "Given this information, to what extent do you oppose or support the DREAM Act?" (0 = "strongly oppose," 10 = "strongly support"); results are shown in Figure 1, C. Despite the increase in support for bipartisanship and more favorable evaluations of the opposing party's arguments, comparisons of treatment and control groups on support for the DREAM Act reveal that, ultimately, the tone in which polarization is discussed does little to mitigate partisan position-taking. While Democrats are less supportive of the DREAM Act as expected in three of the criticism conditions—Elite Republican, Informed Citizens, and Public Opinion—none of these comparisons is statistically significant (Elite Democrat, $p < .186$; Elite Republican, $p < .842$; Informed Citizens, $p < .721$; Expert, $p < .841$; Public Opinion, $p < .112$).[16] The results suggest that the criticisms and appeals for compromise that are so prevalent in the news coverage of elite party divisions do little to mitigate the degree to which people follow their party's endorsed policy positions.

We have thus far only focused attention on Democratic respondents because of the relatively small number of Republicans in our sample. As noted earlier, our results are the same with these Republicans added to the analyses. We have additionally explored the influence of our treatments among Republicans by combining the experimental groups into two groups (treatment and control); that is, we combined Republicans in the control and no party cue conditions that received no criticism of polarization, and then combined all treatment groups that received criticisms from the different sources (see Supplemental Material). This enables us to test, with sufficient power, for treatment effects among Republican respondents.[17] When polarization is discussed within a critical and negative frame, Republicans become significantly more supportive of bipartisanship (control mean = 5.03, treatment mean = 5.90, $p < .001$), and evaluate the argument opposed to their party's position as more effective (control = 4.44, treatment = 5.19, $p < .005$), but in the end, do not alter their policy preferences (control = 4.72, treatment = 4.99, $p < .279$). As such, it seems that the general pattern of results for Republicans parallels the findings for Democrats.

Why do criticisms of polarization increase support for bipartisanship and mitigate disconfirmation biases, yet fail to alter policy preferences? One possible explanation hinges on party identification. Existing work suggests the influence of partisan-motivated reasoning for policy preferences is contingent on the salience and personal importance of party identification (Druckman et al., 2013; Lavine et al., 2012). It may be that criticisms of polarization ultimately fail to alter the subjective importance of one's partisan identity and

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thus its influence in preference formation. To address this possibility, we asked respondents, "How important to you is your party identification?" (1 = "not important at all," 7 = "very important"). Although not shown graphically here, comparisons of control and treatment group means reveal that the criticisms of polarization do not significantly alter the importance of party identification (Elite Democrat, $p < .769$; Elite Republican, $p < .628$; Informed Citizens, $p < .199$; Expert, $p < .097$; Public Opinion, $p < .379$; see Supplemental Material for results). The failure of criticisms to alter the subjective importance of party identifications likely inhibits the ability of criticisms to fully attenuate the influence of partisanship in preference formation.

Our evidence is thus mixed in regards to H2. We see clear evidence that criticizing partisan conflict prompts individuals to consider the opposing side's argument as of higher quality. Yet, there is scant evidence that these criticisms lead to a more moderated and less partisan policy attitude. These results suggest that criticisms of polarization found in the *Times*, and perhaps other news outlets, prompt citizens to express support for bipartisan compromise but do not completely undermine the cognitive biases among citizens that help incentivize continuing intransigence among partisan elites.

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Study 2: Causal Frames and Attitudes Toward Politics

Next, we assess the extent to which framing the cause of polarization shapes political interest, trust, and efficacy (H3 and H4). We test these hypotheses with a survey experiment conducted by the Time-sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences (TESS) project. The survey experiment was fielded by GfK (formerly Knowledge Networks) from December 24, 2013, until January 9, 2014, with a total of 1,323 individuals participating.[18] The Supplemental Material provides a breakdown of the sample's demographics; the sample is representative of the mass public in terms of its gender, education, racial, and partisan/ideological composition while being slightly older and wealthier.

Participants were randomly assigned across four treatment groups.[19] All participants were presented with an introduction to the survey battery, answered three policy questions, and then proceeded to answer a battery of items about their interest in politics, political trust, and external efficacy. The salience and causal description of polarization was manipulated in the introduction to the battery, which contained no reference to partisan polarization, a polarization prime, the prime along with a strategic causal frame, or the prime with a value causal frame. For instance, those in the prime (no causal frame condition) read, "Now we'd like to ask you some questions concerning issues that have been in the news recently. The Republican and Democratic parties are unified among themselves but far apart in how they see these issues and we'd like your opinion concerning them." This definition of polarization matches the common definition of the phenomenon (see Note 1) and is designed to simply elevate the salience of polarization. Meanwhile, those in the strategic frame condition received this prime and also read that polarization is "due to their concerns over winning re-election, maintaining support from the special interest groups that contribute to them financially, and a desire to cultivate a particular image for the party." This explanation emphasizes the need for elites to respond to other actors (i.e., strategic incentives). Those in the value frame condition instead read that polarization was "due to fundamental differences in their values, their beliefs concerning the role of government, and how they envision what our society should look like." Here, party differences stem from qualities of elites themselves (i.e. values) rather than strategic incentives. For respondents analyzed in text (see Note 20), this is the only information that varied across treatments.

After receiving the treatment, participants answered a battery of items tapping their attitudes toward politics and government. We focus on four measures. First, we assessed a respondent's political interest by asking how interested they are in information about government and politics, with responses ranging from Not At All (= 1) to Extremely (= 5) on a fully labeled scale. Second, we use a factor variable of attitudes toward government (i.e., trust and external efficacy) derived from four measures: how often respondents thought the government could be trusted to do what is right, whether the government acts in the benefit of all people, whether they could affect what the government does, and whether government officials cared what people like them thought; higher values indicate more positive attitudes toward government.[20] Our final two measures ask respondents to indicate how much they trust the Republican and Democratic parties to represent their interests (range: 1–7). All three non-factor variables (i.e., interest, trust in the Democratic Party, and trust in the Republican Party) are centered in the analyses that follow ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$).[21]

Results

We present our results graphically in Figures 2 and 3. In these figures we provide the predicted marginal values for our dependent variables broken down by treatment condition and partisanship. Figures 2 and 3 are based on OLS models where we regress the dependent

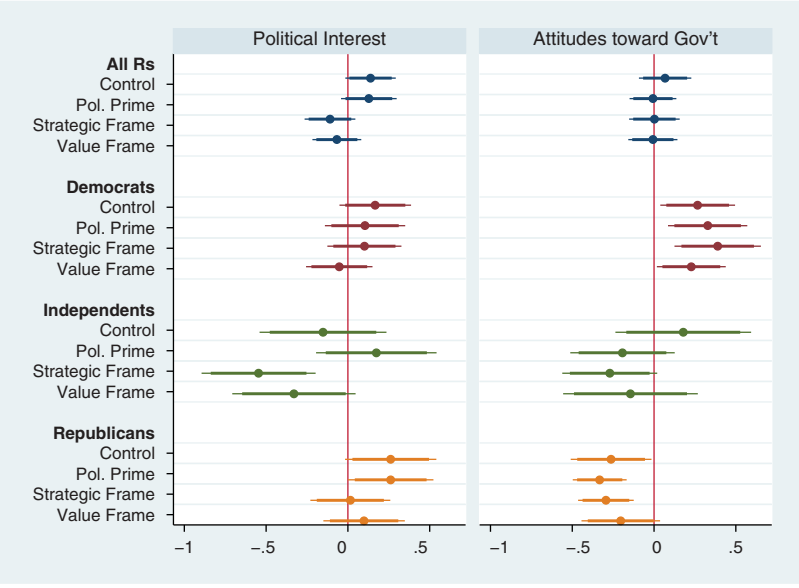

Figure 2. Expected values for political interest and attitudes toward government by party identification (PID) and treatment.

Notes: Markers provide the expected value of the dependent variable (DV) by experimental condition (left-hand margin). The first set of markers corresponds to all respondents; estimates were achieved by regressing the DV on treatment condition indicators for all respondents. The next three subsets provide results for Democrats, Independents, and Republicans and stem from OLS regressions (with bootstrapped standard errors) with the following predictors: treatment condition, PID, and their interaction. Ninety-five percent and 90% confidence intervals are provided along with a reference line at 0 (both DVs are centered so that $M = 0$, $SD = 1$).

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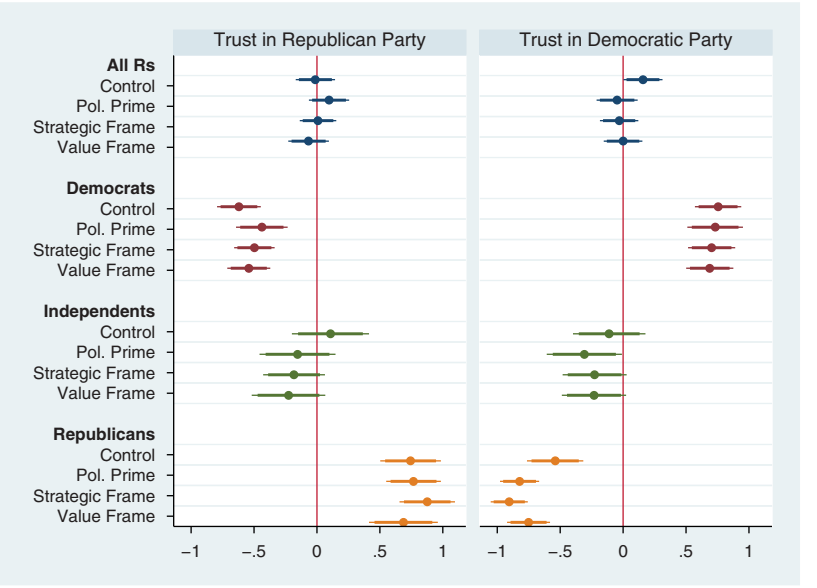

Figure 3. Expected values for trust in the Republican and Democratic parties by party identification (PID) and treatment.

Notes: Markers provide the expected value of the dependent variable (DV) by experimental condition (left-hand margin). The first set of markers corresponds to all respondents; estimates were achieved by regressing the DV on treatment condition indicators only. The next three subsets provide results for Democrats, Independents, and Republicans and stem from OLS regressions (with bootstrapped standard errors) with the following predictors: treatment condition, PID, and their interaction. Ninety-five percent and 90% confidence intervals are provided along with a reference line at 0 (both DVs are centered so that $M = 0$, $SD = 1$).

variable on treatment condition (for analyses conducted on all respondents) or on treatment condition, partisanship, and the interaction between the two (for our sub-analyses on particular partisanship groups). Full model results are presented in the Supplemental Material. While our sample contains an experimental group unexposed to polarization, and thus useful for benchmarking the influence of our treatments, the core comparison implied by our hypotheses concerns the influence of the causal frames relative to the condition in which polarization is primed but no cause is mentioned.

We begin by exploring effects among Democrats and Republicans where we see little evidence of treatment effects, particularly among Democrats. Judging from the control group, partisan identifiers began the experiment with similar levels of interest but polarized beliefs about government (Democrats positive, Republicans negative) and the parties (trust of the in-party and distrust of the out-party). These beliefs appear mostly unmoved by the treatments albeit with one exception: Republicans' trust in the Democratic party. While we do not see evidence that the causal frames affected how Republicans responded to the Democratic party relative to the condition where polarization is primed sans causal frame, we do see that Republicans become less trustful of the Democrats when polarization is made salient (i.e., with the control as baseline versus all three polarization groups; $M_{\text{control}} = 1.91$, $M_{\text{polarization}} = 1.58$; $t_{219} = 2.72$, $p < .01$). This decline in already low levels

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of trust in the Democratic party is particularly strong among those exposed to the strategic frame, per Figure 3. Ultimately, we see little support for the contention that polarization increases interest in politics (e.g., Abramowitz, 2010) or that it substantially affects trust in government (e.g., King, 1997), at least among partisans.[22]

Among Independents we see greater evidence of treatment effects in Figures 2 and 3, but it appears that Independents are primarily responding to the salience of partisan conflict itself. For instance, Independents in the three polarization prime conditions look much the same on the attitudes toward government measure in that they all report attitudes substantially more negative than Independents in the control ($M_{\text{control}} = 0.18$, $M_{\text{polarization}} = -0.21$; $t_{125} = 1.88$, $p < .10$). The same effect emerges for trust in the Republican party ($M_{\text{control}} = 2.48$, $M_{\text{polarization}} = 2.15$; $t_{126} = 1.76$, $p < .10$) and trust in the Democratic party measures although this latter difference is not significant even at the less traditional $p < .10$ standard ($M_{\text{control}} = 2.42$, $M_{\text{polarization}} = 2.25$; $t_{126} = 0.87$, $p = .39$). The one area where the causal frames do matter is with political interest. As shown in Figure 2, Independents in the strategic frame condition evince significantly lower levels of interest than Independents in the polarization (no cause condition) in line with our expectations. However, Figure 2 shows that Independents in the value frame condition also report *lower* interest, although this difference is not statistically significant. The results in Figure 2 thus reaffirm some prior studies which are critical of the influence of strategic frames on mass attitudes, but they also suggest that a prominent alternative explanation for elite actions—values—may not lead to the opposite pattern of results.

Overall, we find mixed support for our expectations. On the one hand, it appears that making polarization salient had little overall effect on partisans regardless of its causal framing. On the other hand, we see that Independents react to polarized conflict negatively with the attributed cause only mattering for political interest. Our results thus sit in tension with some prior studies (e.g., Abramowitz, 2010), but in concert with those of Rogowski (2014), in that they suggest a net negative influence on political engagement due to polarization itself due to the negative reaction among Independents.

Conclusion

Elite partisan polarization has reshaped American politics. However, polarization is a phenomenon that citizens learn about largely through the news media and thus no account of its influence is complete without considering the specific nature of how polarization is portrayed. Our study provides the first in-depth exploration of both how polarization is communicated to the mass public and how components of this portrayal influence public opinion. We show that coverage of polarization in the *New York Times* is not neutral but instead frequently frames polarization as problematic. We also show that coverage commonly frames polarization as rooted in ideological commitments rather than strategic incentives in a deviation from existing work on the framing of political conflict. These choices in media framing appear to be consequential for mass-level response. Framing polarization as problematic prompts citizens to support bipartisanship and more even-handedly evaluate arguments from the opposing party, yet it does not appear to make them more open to persuasion. In our second study, we show that Independents tend to react strongly to polarization *in general* although particularly negatively when it is framed strategically (e.g., our results vis-à-vis interest). Moreover, our respondents did not seem overly enthused about polarization when framed as caused by differences in values; different causes, in other words, may lead to the same results.

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We believe that our study has important implications for existing debates. First, despite a resurgence in mass partisanship (Hetherington, 2001; Iyengar et al., 2012), surveys routinely show that the mass public remains committed to bipartisanship (Harbridge et al., 2014). Our results suggest that one reason for this potential discord could be the media's framing of polarization. When polarization is framed as problematic for democratic governance, citizens express more support for bipartisanship but fail to suppress partisan distortions in opinion formation that help incentivize intransigence among partisan elites. Yet, despite these findings, we recognize that party competition need not be cast in a normatively unfavorable light. Disch (2011, p. 101) states, "individuals form coherent and relatively stable preferences not in spite of but by means of messages that political elites deploy in pursuit of un-avowed competitive goals." That is, while elite polarization amplifies partisan-motivated reasoning, and our critical frames did little to mitigate party position-taking, party competition leads people to adopt the ideological outlook of their party (Levendusky, 2009) and helps people form more ideologically coherent attitudes—a trait long perceived as normatively desirable (Converse, 1964). Thus, normative assessments of the consequences of elite polarization for citizen competence remain unclear.

Second, our results concerning the influence of causal frames speak to an unsettled question in the literature raised by Jacobs (1998) in a review of Cappella and Jamieson (1997). While Cappella and Jamieson suggest that the growing use of strategic frames by the media is a powerful contributor to declines in governmental trust seen since the 1970s, Jacobs countered that it was the growth in elite polarization driving these results. While interesting, this proposition has not been adequately tested in the intervening years (but see Mutz & Reeves, 2005). However, our results in Study 2 suggest that Jacobs may be on to something; simply priming polarization led to significant reductions in trust among Independents and decreased trust in the Democratic party among Republicans. In neither case did this depend on the use of a strategic frame. These results, of course, stem from only a single study and should not be taken as definitive, but they are suggestive that party conflict itself has a powerful negative influence irrespective of its causal framing.

Our study is not without limitations. First, our content analysis only examines *Times* coverage and is not representative of all media outlets. It is possible that television coverage features fewer mentions of polarization's causes given that textual news sources generally provide more contextual information (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). On the other hand, it seems plausible that the *Times* may *under-represent* the degree of critical coverage of polarization insofar as the *Times* more strongly adheres to traditional American news norms stressing "objectivity" and dispassion than other outlets (Schudson, 2001). Ultimately, our understanding of these issues will only be enhanced by further explorations of coverage across media sources. With respect to Study 1, it is possible that had we examined a less politicized issue, the critical frames that prompted more even-handed evaluations of arguments would have ultimately shaped policy preferences. Finally, Study 2 occurred fairly shortly after a federal government shutdown, which may have important, albeit unclear, implications for our results. The shutdown may have made attitudes toward government both negative and salient, effectively "pretreating" our subjects and limiting treatment effects (Druckman & Leeper, 2012). Alternatively, the negative reaction by Independents in particular may have been made more likely by this dramatically negative event. Ultimately, establishing external validity requires replication of results across a diverse array of samples, stimuli, and contexts (McDermott, 2011).

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Let us conclude by noting an important area for future work. In the present article, we examined the influence of framing polarization as problematic and causal framing separately. We did this because these aspects of coverage may occur separate from each other (i.e., a story could criticize polarization as problematic without stating a cause) and because they are implicated in different outcomes of interest. However, future work would greatly benefit from attention to their interaction. The frequent framing of polarization as problematic for American politics may explain why we did not see greater differences across the three polarization treatment groups in Study 2. Individuals in these conditions may have been reacting primarily to the affective charge they associated with polarization, as learned from prior media exposure, with this salient negativity driving resulting responses. This possibility is consistent with our results, but one that requires further empirical validation.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed on the publisher's website at http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2015.1055526

Notes

1. Consistent with existing literature (Druckman et al., 2013; Zaller, 1992), "elites" refers to elected officials and activists who have some control over policy, and "partisan polarization" refers to increased ideological distance between parties and increased homogeneity within parties (McCarty et al., 2006).

2. We examine framing polarization as problematic and framing the causes separately for a couple of reasons. First, news may often frame polarization as problematic without referencing any specific cause for the partisan divisions—a point supported by our content analysis. Second, the different frames likely have consequences for different outcomes of interest, and we want to focus on particular processes and their effects. Although beyond the current scope, future research may benefit from exploring the intersection of these frames.

3. We were careful in the selection of our search keywords to avoid pulling in stories primarily concerning *mass* polarization. Before coding we checked our sample to remove such stories so that our sample would focus on elite polarization. Search terms included variations of the terms partisan/ideological polarization, partisan/ideology conflict, partisan/ideology division, partisan/ideological differences. See the Supplemental Material for the full list of search terms.

4. See data replication files for a full list of criticisms.

5. Value frames focus on ideological differences, as in the following: "a step back illuminates roots deeper than the prevailing notion that Washington politicians are simply fools acting for electoral advantage or partisan spite"; rather polarization reflects "the oldest philosophic battle of the American party system" (Article: "Deep Philosophical Divide Underlies Impasse"). Strategic frames make salient the need of elected officials to respond to other actors, in driving polarization, as in, "Reaction from the conservative news media poses another risk if Republicans compromise.

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'How does Fox play this?' asked former Representative Tom Davis . . ." (Article: "Talks Highlight a Structural Divide").

6. While responsiveness to voters and special interests are infrequently mentioned as causing partisan polarization, the frequency with which the parties themselves are blamed suggests that an alternative non-values-based explanation (e.g., party loyalty and discipline) is nevertheless commonly voiced. A total of 26.6% of the stories coded included language blaming both parties, while an additional 11% blamed one of the parties (either the GOP or the Democrats) for causing polarization. Interestingly, the majority of stories blaming both parties do not also include a values causal attribution (77.3%).

7. Our polarization prime is identical to that of Druckman and colleagues (2013): "The issue is being discussed in a time of partisan "polarization" in Congress. That is, in recent years there has been an increasingly large partisan divide in Congress on a wide range of issues. Not only are the parties often far apart, but most members of each party are often on the same side as the rest of their party."

8. While the seventh group may appear to be a baseline, it cannot be directly compared to the treatment groups of interest since it differs from these groups on more than one dimension (presence of party endorsements, presence of criticisms).

9. Respondents were asked, "How much credibility would [x] have to discuss partisan divisions on this issue in Congress?" 1 = very little credibility and 7 = complete credibility. Nonpartisan Expert, $M = 5.71$ (0.17), Concerned Citizens, $M = 5.06$ (0.18), Same Party Elite, $M = 4.44$ (0.13), Public Opinion, $M = 4.20$ (0.18), Opposing Party Elite, $M = 2.17$ (0.14).

10. Respondents were asked, "How fair do you think the author was in her discussion of the DREAM Act?" (1 = very unfair, 7 = very fair), $M = 5.44$ (0.09). They were also asked, "Overall, do you see the article as being opposed to or in support of the DREAM Act?" (1 = strongly opposed, 4 = neutral, 7 = strong in support), $M = 4.95$ (0.07).

11. Since the hypothesis surrounding treatment groups relative to control is directional in nature, we can appropriately employ one-tailed tests of significance (Blalock, 1979). Furthermore, the results are robust to an alternative analytical strategy for multiple group comparisons, ANOVA tests, as we detail in subsequent notes.

12. Inferences are similar if both Democrats and Republicans are included (See the Supplemental Material).

13. Elite Democrat, $p < 0.029$; Elite Republican, $p < 0.001$; Informed Citizens, $p < 0.001$; Expert, $p < 0.001$; Public Opinion, $p < 0.002$. The results are bolstered by an ANOVA which shows a significant difference between conditions: $F(5, 366) = 6.66$, $p < 0.001$. To focus more specifically on treatment effects, ANOVA analyses in this article focus on the control and five treatment groups, but do not include the "no party cues" condition.

14. As with support for bipartisanship our results are the same if we also include Republican respondents (see the Supplemental Material).

15. ANOVA results: $F(5, 366) = 2.80$, $p < 0.017$.

16. ANOVA results: $F(5, 366) = 1.80$, $p < 0.113$.

17. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

18. Participants were recruited from GfK's KnowledgePanel. Participants are recruited into the KnowledgePanel using either random digit dialing (RDD) or address-based sampling (ABS) procedures, with panel members provided Internet equipment as needed. A random sample representative of the national adult population is then drawn from the panel. See the Supplemental Material for an analysis of random assignment; treatment conditions were balanced.

19. While our focus in text concerns attitudes toward government, we also varied the presence of party cues in this experiment to explore causal frames' influence on preference formation; these analyses are presented in the Supplemental Material for the sake of space. Half of the sample received party cues in the three policy questions they read and half did not. Our key expectation was that strategic frames would undermine partisan cue taking for similar reasons as described in the theory section for Study 1 (and as in Lee et al., 2008). We find mixed support for this contention. Democrats show little evidence of cue taking in general regardless of the salience of polarization or its attributed

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cause. On the other hand, we find evidence of cue taking among Republicans in the no polarization prime and polarization prime conditions and that both causal frames undermined this cue-taking process among Republicans. Note that the results shown in text (i.e., which focus on governmental attitudes) only explore individuals from the subsample who *did not receive* party cues ($N = 655$) as such information can alter the considerations used when answering our key outcome measures (as in Lock, Shapiro, & Jacobs, 1999).We provide a replication of our in-text models using the full sample in the Supplemental Material; our inferences remain substantially similar, with Independents continuing to be negatively influenced by polarized conflict.

20. A factor analysis reveals all four variables loading onto a single factor (eigenvalue = 2.43); Cronbach's alpha = 0.77.

21. See the Supplemental Material for mean values on these four variables for all conditions.

22. There may have been little room for further depreciation. The control group averages for our four trust/efficacy measures lie in the 1.8–2.4 range (range: 1–5). This is likely due to the timing of the experiment as it was conducted a month and a half after the federal government shutdown.

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