

# **Bully Partisan or Partisan Bully?:**

Partisanship, Elite Polarization, and U.S. Presidential Communication

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**ABSTRACT**

Polarization among political elites has been a well-studied aspect of political science scholarship. Party competition is seen as healthy for democracy; however, polarization often leads to gridlock and legislative inaction. There is an ongoing debate about how elite polarization has an effect on individual attitude formation, particularly among groups of people important to Presidential electoral politics like young voters and in-party partisans. Using results from a laboratory experiment, I find that when primed to think about elite polarization as high, Presidential communication yields higher job approval ratings, issue importance ratings, and issue stances closer to the party line compared to primed to think elite polarization is low or no prime at all. The results suggest that when primed to think elite polarization is high, partisan identity overwhelms respondents and makes them focus most on the partisan source; without such a prime, respondents consider the content of the Presidential communication.

**Keywords:** Elite polarization, partisanship, partisan reasoning, Presidential rhetoric, Presidential communication, priming, agenda setting

“Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed.”

--Abraham Lincoln, 1858 (as cited in Zarefsky 1994).

Then-Congressman Abraham Lincoln, speaking during the Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858, highlighted the importance of what he called ‘public sentiment’ (Zarefsky 1994). Speaking during one of the most socially polarized times in American history, he realized the value of having the public on his side. Contemporarily, elite partisan polarization may be challenging the degree to which the President can affect public sentiment or public opinion. Polarization has been well addressed in political science literature and political scientists have long felt that competition is healthy for democracy (i.e. Schattschneider 1960). There is now ongoing debate, however, about how polarization affects individual-level opinion formation (Druckman, et al. forthcoming; Jerit 2009; Levendusky 2009a; Hetherington 2009), which could also have an effect on the impact of Presidential communication. The underlying question: does elite polarization impact presidential influence and if so, how?

Elite polarization is defined as high levels of ideological distance between parties and also a strong degree of cohesiveness and homogeneity within parties (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal 2006). While polarization among the political class has been a dominant theme in recent political science research, less is known about how elite polarization affects individual evaluations of political actors and institutions (apart from work on citizen polarization itself). Thus, increased attention to how elite polarization impacts citizen decision-making per se is important in understanding attitude

formation. This is particularly true for two subgroups (as I will discuss later): fellow partisans and young voters. One critical function for the President is maintaining party support, especially for an incumbent president. Co-partisans are generally easier to turn out and more open to persuasion for Presidential communication; electorally speaking, young in-party supporters are often a key to victory and are just developing their partisan identity (Jennings & Markus 1984; Achen 2002). As a result, support from these two groups are often crucial for Presidents, their agendas, and their campaigns.

The potential impact of elite polarization on young co-partisans is relatively unclear; on one hand, elite polarization could cause disillusionment and weaken Presidential power even within his own party. On the other hand, it could strengthen partisan identity and increase partisan power. The latter point seems more plausible, as I will argue. In what follows, I will explore how an environment with highly polarized political elites affects how individuals approve of the President's job performance and the issues he chooses to include in his public addresses. Specifically, there are two (not exhaustive but important) dimensions at play: level of perceived elite polarization and reference to partisanship – that is, how does elite polarization matter when a President does or does not reference/reinforce partisanship? This the question I address, and as will be clear, the findings have implications for understanding the role of partisanship in individual attitude formation and Presidential influence and the role of parties in that process.

This paper explores: a) how polarization affects Presidential influence on these two key subgroups and (b) how partisan identity interrelates with Presidential

communication to alter public opinion formation. As a result, this is a novel study that is the first to investigate elite polarization, Presidential rhetorical influence, and how what he says matters.

After brief discussions of elite polarization and partisanship, Presidential communication and public approval, and party cues and persuasion, I provide the results of a laboratory experiment that suggest that perceptions of high levels of elite polarization have a positive effect on Presidential approval and the issues he raises among young in-party partisans. Further, priming elite polarization intensifies partisan attachment and the power of partisanship in attitude formation shifts foci toward the partisan cue (the President) in lieu of the actual content of Presidential communication. More specifically, in conditions that highlight high levels of elite polarization, in-party partisans focus on the partisan source cue and approve of the President and his issues significantly more than in conditions that highlight low levels of elite polarization. The results also suggest that Presidents can use perceived partisan polarization to their advantage among their co-partisans to affect their most prized possessions: public approval and the public agenda.

### **POLARIZATION AND PARTISANSHIP**

One of the hallmarks of a deliberative democracy is an open exchange of ideas, even if they run counter to one's own. A threat to genuine political deliberation and debate should be deeply troubling for those who believe there is value to robust political discussion and meaningful, deep reflection on the important issues of the day. Political

competition and party antagonism has long been viewed as vital to democracy. As E.E. Schattschneider (1942) wrote, "Political parties created democracy and... modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties." Further, Lipset (2000) suggests that a stable democracy needs to foster the rights of opposition, not limit them. Mansbridge (1983) even suggests that turbulence may indeed be a necessary facet of any society that considers itself to be democratic. In other words, democracy and competition go hand-in-hand.

Over the last fifty years, however, members of the United States Congress, the President, and other party elites of the two major parties have become increasingly polarized; the parties have been moving toward the extremes on the political spectrum and they have become increasingly cohesive with little or no overlap between them (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal 2006).<sup>1</sup> Rather than promoting party competition, per se, polarization increases the likelihood of legislative gridlock and rancor among the political elite. Again, many view deliberative democracy as salubrious and a hallmark of it is political deliberation and debate. Intense competition and elite polarization prevents this, however; as elites become more polarized they are less likely to compromise and gridlock is more likely to ensue (Binder 1999; Jones 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> There are a variety of measures to come to the same conclusion: the level of elite polarization is increasing in the United States over time (Theriault 2006; Aldrich 1995; Coleman 1997; Collie & Mason 2000; Jacobson 2000; Rohde 1991; Stonecash et al. 2003). Evidence from McCarty, et al. (2009) show the trend of increasing partisanship in Congress from 1879-2009 for both the House and the Senate, controlling for region among Democrats. Their analyses come to the same conclusion, using either party means or Common Space scores to show that the level of elite polarization has increased substantially over time. Regardless of the measurement used, it is clear that political parties are becoming more ideologically distinct, with little or no overlap between the two parties among elected officials in Congress.

Partisanship has gotten stronger over the past twenty years (Lavine et. al 2012; Bartels 2000; Hetherington 2001) and serves several functions. It drives how people think about and respond to elections (Markus & Converse 1979); it helps people organize political attitudes (Jackman & Sniderman 2002, Levendusky 2010). Yet while there is a robust discussion of whether elite polarization leads to or contributes to mass polarization (see Layman, et al. 2006 for a review), less is known about how elite polarization impacts individual-level attitude formation. In essence, no one looks at how polarization affects Presidential influence or how the elite polarization-attitude mechanism works.<sup>2</sup>

### *Partisan Reasoning*

Party identification and appeals to it can have significant repercussions for evaluation of and support for political actors and the issues they raise. Ordinary citizens take cues from polarized elites and extant research has shown that during times of elite polarization, partisanship plays a more prominent role in political attitude formation and decision-making (Levendusky 2009a). When partisanship strongly colors the way individuals view the political world, it can create a systematic bias toward existing beliefs and incentivizes adhering to the party cues that are relatively easy to adopt (Lavine, et al. 2012). Partisanship is an affective bond rooted in feelings toward party-linked groups; it serves as a filter of political information and it “raises a perceptual

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, several studies, however, look at how polarization or conflict affects decision-making on issues but not specifically on Presidential influence, making this focus distinct (see Slothuus & de Vreese 2010; Druckman, et al forthcoming; Levendusky 2010).

screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation" (Campbell et al 1960, p. 133). Partisanship is hypothesized to produce systematic biases in what political information citizens attend to and how that information is interpreted and evaluated (Bartels 2002; Gelman et al 2008).

To explore and to explain these biases, research in social psychology and more recently in political behavior focuses on motivated reasoning (Taber & Lodge 2006; Lavine, et al 2012). Motivated reasoning refers to the propensity to seek out attitudinally-congruent information that confirms prior beliefs (confirmation bias); to interpret new information that supports previous opinions as stronger and more effective (prior attitude effect); and to spend more time and energy counter-arguing and dismissing information that is incongruent with previous attitudes regardless of its factual accuracy (disconfirmation bias).

Partisan motivated reasoning, then, suggests that partisans are more driven to view their own party and its representatives as more competent, more favorable, and better representatives (see Bartels 2002; Druckman & Bolsen 2011). As party elites become more polarized and that polarization is communicated to citizens, partisans should become more certain (i.e. less ambivalent) about their own party identity (Lavine, et al 2012). Motivated reasoning, then, leads people to cling to their prior attitudes, including their partisan predispositions, and thus may increase support and agreement for their partisan speakers.

This increased salience of partisanship can have significant effects on individual-level attitudes, orientation toward politics, and evaluation of political actors. Of



particular importance is the President of the United States, one of only two nationally elected representatives. The President should be concerned with public sentiment or public opinion to accomplish his goals; political scientists should be concerned with Presidential influence given the uniqueness of its national constituency and the ubiquity of the American Presidency.

### *Young Voters, Co-Partisans*

There are several ways that partisanship and elite polarization can have an effect on the President and the impact of his communication.<sup>3</sup> One subgroup that is particularly important and interesting is younger voters since they are especially pliable in terms of partisan attachment. Jennings & Markus (1984: 1000) show that younger voters have a weaker level of partisanship, “leading to more volatile voting behavior which, in turn, failed to provide the consistent reinforcement needed to intensify preexisting partisan leanings.” Relatedly, Achen (2002) argues that first-time voters have no prior experience or beliefs about voting and therefore have no estimate of average future benefits from a party. Young voters, as a result, turn to parental experience to help orient them to politics. This parental orientation, however, decays over time,

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<sup>3</sup> Cohen (2009) points to polarization as the driver behind Presidential rhetorical strategy focusing on local media outlets and audiences, specifically suggesting that Presidents changed their strategy of going public because of significant polarization. In other words, Presidents make strategic choices toward smaller, more local targets for their communication to be most effective. Kernell & Rice (2010) and Feltus (2009) show that the partisan gap in audiences for Presidential television addresses has increased substantially over time. Iyengar & Hahn (2009) suggest that polarization leads to individuals seeking media sources that confirm rather than challenge existing beliefs. Relatedly, Levendusky (2011) shows that exposure to partisan media leads to more extreme attitudes by promoting biased information processing which, in turn, generates attitude polarization.

particularly when encountering new information and when acquiring additional experience.

Young voters like college students are still evolving in terms of their partisan identification so it is important to see what activates partisan identity, particularly at such an early stage of partisan development. Young voters are also often very important to a campaign so motivating young, student participants is particularly important. Then-Senator Obama received 66 percent of voters under 30 in the 2008 election, the highest of any Presidential candidate since exit polls began. During the 2008 campaign, for example, they turned out in higher-than usual numbers and helped augment Senator Obama's efforts through increased volunteerism for the campaign. "But young people provided not only their votes but also many enthusiastic campaign volunteers. Some may have helped persuade parents and older relatives to consider Obama's candidacy. And far more young people than older voters reported attending a campaign event while nearly one-in-ten donated money to a presidential candidate" (Keeter et al. 2008).

In-party partisans also constitute a significant and important subgroup of all partisans because extensive research has shown that partisans act differently based on whether they encounter information that is either congruent or incongruent with existing beliefs (Lavine et al 2012; Lodge & Taber 2000). For these reasons, a focus on in-party partisans and young voters constitutes an emphasis on two important subgroups of the American public. In addition, it makes practical sense for politicians to focus on their core constituency of in-party partisans and the particularly (or potentially)

energetic youth vote when trying to have a persuasive impact and when mobilizing the public.

Again, the President has a vested interest in affecting public opinion, but recent elite polarization and salience of partisanship, however, calls into question his ability to do so. The following section provides a brief summary of existing work on Presidential influence over public opinion; why it is important to the President that he be able to do so; and the domains over which he can expect to have some influence: job approval, issue salience, and issue stances.

#### **HOW POLARIZATION AND PARTISANSHIP AFFECT PRESIDENTIAL INFLUENCE**

There is an open debate about whether and when Presidents have the ability to shape public opinion. Indeed, much research in political science has been devoted to discussing when and why the bully pulpit matters in terms of persuasion and job approval (Edwards 2003; Druckman & Holmes 2004; Neustadt 1960; Edwards & Eshbaugh-Soha 2000). Existing research suggests or shows that at times, presidents do work to affect public opinion (Edwards 2002; Druckman & Jacobs 2006, 2009; Druckman, Jacobs, & Ostermeier 2004; Jacobs & Shapiro 1994, 2000; Rottinghaus 2006; Kernell 1997) and are sometimes successful (Cohen 2009; Druckman and Holmes 2004; Canes-Wrone 2006). On the other hand, Edwards (2003) strongly questions whether the President can influence public opinion and Howell (2003) questions whether he needs to bother with public opinion at all to be effective.

In reality, presidential influence is likely contingent on the audience and external conditions (e.g., Druckman and Holmes 2004) and understanding these conditions has alluded nearly all past research (e.g., Edwards 2003: 167). As Druckman & Holmes (2004) point out, however, surprisingly little is known about the *determinants* of Presidential influence. Edwards (2003) writes, “We know very little about how people perceive messages from the President or other elites. Nor do we know much about how citizens come to understand public issues or develop their values and other predispositions that the president seeks to prime” (167). Much of existing work focuses on aggregate trends on Presidential approval and how it is affected by political and social events (i.e. wars, media coverage, the economy, etc.) (Kernell 1978; Edwards et al. 1995). Gronke & Newman (2003) write that in comparison to aggregate trends in approval, “so little is known about the individual level determinants of presidential approval” (22). Similarly, while much attention is paid to the factors that affect Presidential approval, less work focuses on what the President can do or say to affect it himself.<sup>4</sup> Thus, my study fills an important gap to look at how (1) polarization influences Presidential influence and 2) how it does so in terms of the content of what the president says and particularly references to partisanship itself.

But of what value is it for Presidents to influence mass opinion? There are three constructs that Presidents can use to increase the likelihood of policy success, public prestige, and re-election: job approval, issue salience, and issue stances. First, Presidents

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<sup>4</sup> Many others have looked at the effects of rhetoric on public attitudes or approval (Ragsdale 1984, 1987; Rosenblatt 1998; Sigelman 1980). Wood, et. al (2005) finds that optimistic remarks from President on the economy significantly affect the public’s views on the current and future economic conditions.

have an interest in affecting their own level of approval among the public. Increased approval gives Presidents increased latitude to take positions and to advocate for policy change. Canes-Wrone (2006) shows that there is a strong incentive for Presidents to act with the public's approval rather than acting alone. Canes-Wrone & Schotts (2004) write that responsiveness to public opinion increases nearer to an election and that Presidents with merely average approval ratings are more likely to adopt policy positions congruent with public opinion. Their analysis suggests that Presidents with higher approval ratings have increased freedom to be independent of public approval and to take positions that are preferable to them, even if they may be unpopular among the public.

The influence of many factors (major events, armed conflicts, etc.) will not be uniform across partisan groups since developments will either reinforce or conflict with respondents' partisan predispositions toward a sitting President (Kriner & Schwartz 2009).<sup>5</sup> Finally, Presidents with higher levels of approval are less likely to face Congressional investigation (Kriner & Schwartz 2008). Canes-Wrone & de Marchi (2002)

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<sup>5</sup> Emblematic of a focus on current political and social events, McGraw et al. (1995) and Brace & Hinckley (1992) argue that events like these as well as Presidential actions can have an impact on approval but they do not address the effect of what the President says (i.e. the rhetoric used). The literature aptly addresses what correlates with approval but not how the President can affect that approval (Edwards & Eshbaugh-Soha 2000). Young & Perkins (2005) suggest that Presidents have limited abilities to focus public attention through prime-time addresses. Their results suggest that presidents' influence on the public's attention to foreign policy issues has sharply diminished with the growth of cable subscriptions and plummeting audience ratings for presidential addresses. Their analysis, however, is limited to the State of the Union address and focuses only on foreign policy issues.

also suggest that the President can use high levels of approval along with issue complexity and public salience to leverage the best legislative outcome for himself. In addition to their own job approval, Presidents can affect attitudes toward public policy issues facing the American public in two domains: issue importance and issue stance. As Druckman & Holmes (2004) clearly show, the President can, in fact, exert a persuasive influence over the public.<sup>6</sup> To advance a policy agenda, the President ideally wants the focus of the public to be on the issues he finds most important. Existing work focuses on the impact of Presidential activity on specific issue support, finding that public support or popularity endows Presidents with the ability to change attitudes on specific issues among the public (see Edwards 1983; Kernell 1997; Page & Shapiro 1984, 1992; Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey 1987) and in Congress (Bond, Fleisher, & Wood 2003; Rivers & Rose 1985; Kernell 1997). To enact policies the President finds important, the President's job becomes easier when the public agrees the issues are personally important and agrees that the President's stance is valid and correct.

Agenda setting has been a very well documented phenomenon with Presidential communication (Iyengar & Kinder 1989; Scheufele 2000). Wood & Peake (1998) suggest the President needs to attend to what the public thinks is important<sup>7</sup>. The President, however, has a vested interest in identifying the issues he thinks the public *should* view

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<sup>6</sup> Another subset of the literature focuses on how Presidential activities can influence their popularity (MacKuen 1983; Ragsdale 1984, 1987; Brace & Hinckley 1992; Ostrom & Simon 1985, 1988). The underlying point is that while the President can affect his popularity, these effects are generally short-lived or are dependent upon the nature of the activity (i.e. domestic vs. foreign trip, major policy speech vs. smaller speech, etc.).

<sup>7</sup> Note that in the analyses below, I focus on personal importance and not national importance as many agenda-setting studies use. Although these measures are a bit different, they are consistent with existing agenda-setting constructs.

as important. Agenda setting suggests the President can sometimes do just that. There have been a variety of measures to demonstrate the power of agenda setting (i.e. the considerations used to evaluate the President; listing issues that are easily accessible). One key element of agenda setting is the degree to which information consumption leads to perception of issue importance or issue relevance to the individual. Personal relevance is also a significant component of attitude strength (see Visser et al. 2006) and as a result, is the agenda setting focus of this paper.

### *HOW DO ELITE POLARIZATION & PARTISAN REFERENCES AFFECT OPINION FORMATION?*

Recent work suggests that party cues have an effect but they do not overwhelm content (Bullock 2011) while other scholarship suggests that partisanship can, in fact, overwhelm substantive information (Nicholson 2011; Bartels 2002; Lavine, et al. 2012). While it has been well documented that Presidential communication can matter and that there are some explanatory mechanisms to account for its impacts, existing work ignores two key elements the President can potentially exploit: (1) whether party cues are more or less important due to perceptions of elite polarization and (2) how references to political parties matters in terms of how the President's rhetoric affects attitudes. Additionally, it is not known how variance in elite polarization may change how impactful party cues are on individual attitude formation in terms of the President.

Specifically, suggesting that political elites are highly polarized should intensify the impact of party cues over substantive information and should lead to evaluations of

the President being made solely based on partisan identity. Conversely, demonstrating that elite polarization is low should lead to evaluations based more on substantive information. Without the partisan cue, people will turn to content of elite communication rather than simply relying on partisan identity. In other words, elite polarization can theoretically have an impact on individual-level attitudes about the President and the issues he chooses to communicate.

Priming theory suggests that communicators can change the basis for evaluation (i.e. different criteria) that individuals use when forming an opinion (Druckman 2003; Druckman & Holmes 2004; Iyengar & Kinder 1987). For example, if the issue of defense spending is primed and is made more salient to an individual's attitude formation, the individual is more likely to evaluate their approval of the President based on defense spending (i.e. if they approve of the amount of defense spending, it will lead to a higher approval of the President). Issues or attributes that receive the most relative attention are more likely to serve as an overall basis of evaluation (Krosnick & Brannon 1993). Priming is an increasingly common basis to investigate communication effects and attitudinal change, with existing research suggesting that both issues and image can be primed in terms of Presidential rhetoric (Druckman & Holmes 2004).

Political and policy cues have also been shown to be significant factors in the motivation to process information and in formation of measures of personal relevance. Political scientists have found support for the notion that political actors and source cues have a substantial amount of influence on attitudes toward politics (Druckman 2001; Arceneaux 2008; Arceneaux and Kolodny 2009; Bowler et al. 1998; Kam 2005; Boudreau



2009; Carmines & Stimson 1989; Goren, Federico, & Kittilson 2009; Kuklinski & Hurley 1994; Lau & Redlawsk 2006; Lupia 1994; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock 1991). In particular, existing research has shown that substantive political information, such as arguments for and against alternative policy proposals, often holds little sway on judgments when partisan cues are present (Lavine, et al 2012; Cohen 2003; Druckman 2001; Kam 2005; Ottati 1990; Rahn 1993).

Gigerenzer & Todd (1999) suggest that people rank available cues and use the best for attitude formation. They coined the phrase “fast and frugal heuristics” which offers another plausible account of how people attend to political issues when faced with multiple cues. One such heuristic is the “take the best” (TTB) heuristic, where people rank available cues in terms of how informative and accurate they perceive the cues to be. They then take the best cues and ignore the rest. An important aspect of TTB is that people rank cues according to predictive accuracy, what Gigerenzer and Todd refer to as “cue validity.” Since a cue enables people to make inferences about an attitude object without knowing all there is to know about it, it stands to reason that people will follow the most informative cues. It is also plausible to assume that cues can build on each other (see Eagly and Chaiken 1995).

When party is particularly salient, the source cue (i.e. party) should dominate attitude formation and the actual content of the information will be less important. When high elite polarization is primed, I expect content including partisan references will carry little weight. Partisan identity and motivated reasoning will carry the day and regardless of content, I expect to see high partisan cue effects. When people are primed

to think in more partisan terms, a partisan reference in a Presidential speech should matter less since people will focus on the source (i.e. the President). The insight here is that among strong partisans, party reference does not matter but otherwise, it can matter by priming varying levels of partisan reasoning. In other words, when party is salient, people look to the source- it is the best available cue. When party is less salient, however, content will be more impactful in terms of attitude formation; people will be more likely to turn to other cues that may be evident in the content (see Nicholson 2011). The key here, then, is straightforward: polarization leads to one cue ranking (i.e. partisanship dominates cues and becomes the 'best' heuristic) but as polarization decreases, people are more likely to look to different information and cues.

I contribute to this research agenda by unpacking the conditions under which party cues have a substantial influence on attitudes toward political actors and public policy. In so doing, this study not only investigates the origins of opinion polarization but also contributes to the growing body of research on the conditional nature of elite influence (Druckman et al. 2010; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Nicholson 2011). In particular, I focus on the in-party effect of party cues on attitudes toward the President and his job approval as well as the issues he raises in public addresses.

During times of elite polarization and partisan rhetoric, partisan identities are activated and become more salient to attitude formation and more determinative of political behavior (Levendusky 2009). Lavine, et al. (2012) suggest that when partisan strength is activated and strengthened, motivated reasoning should dominate and a focus on the substance of the information should decrease. Levendusky (2010: 118)

identifies two components of elite polarization: “the ideological distance between the parties, and the ideological homogeneity of each party.” As partisan elites polarize and that increased elite polarization is communicated to citizens, partisans in the mass public should become more certain of their own party identity. This is evidenced by recent work by Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes (n.d.), who find that negative campaigning between parties, more common during times of increased polarization, increases the salience of partisan identity. Relatedly, Dancey and Goren (2010: 686) write, “When partisan elites debate an issue and the news media cover it, partisan predispositions are activated in the minds of citizens and subsequently constrain their policy preferences.” Finally, Levendusky (2010: 114-115) adds, “When elites are polarized, they send voters clearer signals about where they stand on the issues of the day... As voters follow these party cues on multiple issues, they begin to hold more consistent attitudes...” In other words, when elite polarization is clear to the public and is thought to be strong, partisan identification becomes deeper and there is an increased likelihood of motivated reasoning and biased reasoning (see Nicholson 2012 for a psychological explanation).<sup>8</sup>

In the absence of a prime about elite polarization, I expect content to matter more, resulting in lower assessments of the President as compared to the high polarization conditions. Finally, when primed to think elite polarization is low, I expect that the de-emphasized partisan cue will also lead people to turn to content of the communication. They will, however, be more critical of the President compared to the

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<sup>8</sup> I build on work on attitude ambivalence by Lavine et al. (2012) by investigating how other aspects of partisan identity are influenced by polarization (for example, importance of that identity, relevance of that identity, etc.)

other two prime conditions, given that partisan identity is explicitly de-emphasized. This should hold true for three major Presidential tools (and my dependent variables): public approval, issue importance and agenda setting, and direct persuasion of public policy issues.

In sum, I expect that (1) priming partisanship by invoking elite polarization should have an impact on evaluations of the President and the issue he raises and (2) partisan references will not have a significant effect when respondents are primed to think in strongly partisan terms but will have a significant effect both when they are primed to think about partisan cooperation and when there is no prime.

I expect an ordering of the key dependent variables based on prime condition: those in the high partisanship conditions should have the highest levels of their partisan cue (the President) and the issues he raises; followed by the no prime conditions because it simulates the status quo in terms of orientation toward the President and his policy issues; and the partisan cooperation prime should yield the lowest levels of approval since respondents should have a weaker partisan attachment. Conversely, when primed away from weighing the source or even when not primed, cues in the content of speeches should have a stronger positive impact compared to the source. Relatedly, when the President explicitly engages in partisan rhetoric by mentioning the parties in his addresses or speeches, there should be a significant difference in the public's reaction only when elite polarization is not primed or is primed as being low, decreasing the strength of partisanship.

### Hypotheses

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Priming high levels of elite polarization will have a positive, significant effect on Presidential approval and approval of the issues raised by the President among in-party partisans. The level of support will be higher than no prime conditions followed by low polarization conditions.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** When primed to think elite polarization is high, in-party partisans will not be affected by content including partisan references; instead, partisan identity and motivated reasoning should dominate attitude formation. Regardless of content, I expect to see high partisan cue effects due to the overpowering effect of partisan identity.

**H<sub>3</sub>:** In the absence of a prime about polarization, content will predominate; partisan identity and partisan references should have less of an effect on Presidential approval and issue approval.

**H<sub>4</sub>:** When primed to think elite polarization is low, respondents will again turn to content in lieu of partisan identity and will be affected by partisan references. Approval of the President and his issues will be lower than the absence of a polarizing prime.

### **MEASUREMENT**

As previously mentioned, I focus on three domains over which the President can expect to have an impact: Presidential job approval, personal importance of issues, and issue stances. First, I measure approval rating by using three separate thermometer ratings ranging from 0-100: (1) the standard Presidential thermometer asking about how the President is handling the job; (2) the attention the respondent thinks the President is paying to the issues most important to them; and (3) an affective rating of how the respondent feels about the President. I include the measurement of each of these three constructs in the Appendix but in the analysis that follows, I use an average of the three for clarity and ease of presentation<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> The summative/average variable is highly correlated with each of the individual measures of Presidential approval, with Cronbach Alpha values of .95, .93, and .96 respectively.

Personal importance of the issues is measured by three questions that ask “How do you rate the importance of (issue) in terms of your own personal priorities?” The scale ranges from 0-4, with a lower value signaling lower issue importance.<sup>10</sup> Lastly, I measured issue stance on the four issues addressed by the Presidential speeches. For each of four policy issues- federal spending and taxes, health care, energy, and the environment- respondents were asked which stance represented their view on a continuum from a conservative position (i.e. we should protect the economy, even at the expense of the environment) to a liberal position (i.e. we should protect the environment, even at the expense of the economy). Each question was asked on a seven-point scale and responses were recoded so the most liberal response is coded as a 0 and the most conservative response is coded as a 6. All of the issues were prominent in the three Presidential addresses watched during the course of the experiment. Precise question wording for all issue stance questions can be found in the appendix.

I reiterate the expected findings by prime level and by condition in Tables 1 and 2 below. First, I expect the priming level to have a significant impact on approval of the President and the issues he raises. Specifically, evaluations of the President and his issues should be highest in the high polarization condition, since Democrats and Democratic leaners should be more inclined to use the partisan source cue in their evaluations. Next, those in the no prime condition should turn to the content of the speech rather than the source cue, resulting in lower ratings compared to the high

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<sup>10</sup> Note that more important and personal relevance are distinct constructs. While issue importance is the more common measure of agenda setting, personal relevance captures the perception of how issues apply to the individual more directly than mere issue importance.

polarization condition but still greater than a low polarization condition. Finally, the lowest ratings should be in the conditions where polarization is described as low because respondents should also turn to the content of the speech; however, unlike the no prime condition, partisan identity will be de-emphasized, so I expect these values to be lower than the no prime conditions. Table 1 summarizes these expectations.

**Table 1: Expected Findings by Prime Level**

	<b>No partisan references</b>	<b>Partisan references</b>	<b>Within-prime differences</b>
<b>No prime</b>	<b>Condition 1:</b> Level of support for President and issues raised between low and high partisanship	<b>Condition 2:</b> Level of support for President and issues raised between low and high partisanship	Condition 2 should be higher than condition 1 given partisan references
<b>Prime for low polarization</b>	<b>Condition 3:</b> Lowest level of support for President and issues raised	<b>Condition 4:</b> Lowest level of support for President and issues raised	Condition 4 should be higher than condition 3 given partisan references
<b>Prime for high polarization</b>	<b>Condition 5:</b> Highest level of support for President and issues raised	<b>Condition 6:</b> Highest level of support for President and issues raised	No significant difference between condition 5 and 6

Secondly, Table 2 shows the specific condition ordering expected for the variables for job approval, issue importance, and issue stance. Again, I expect the most positive evaluations to be in the high polarization primes (condition 5 & 6) but with little to no difference between 5 and 6. Next, the no prime conditions (3 & 4) should be less than the high polarization condition but condition 4 should be significantly more positive than condition 3, since in this condition, respondents should pay closer attention to content and as a result, the videos with partisan references should yield higher evaluations. Finally, low polarization conditions (1 & 2) should be the lowest

values but again, evaluations of the President and the issues he raises should be higher in condition 2 compared to condition 1 for the same reason: in low polarization conditions, respondents should pay closer attention to content and thus be more affected by partisan references. Table 2 summarizes these findings below.

**Table 2: Expected Findings, Ordered By Condition**

Condition Number	Description of Condition	Expected differences
6	High polarization, partisan references	High polarization conditions should be greater than no prime or low polarization; no significant difference between conditions 5 & 6
5	High polarization, no partisan references	
2	No prime, partisan references	No prime conditions should be greater than low polarization conditions but less than high polarization conditions; significant difference between conditions 1 & 2
1	No prime, no partisan references	
4	Low polarization, partisan references	Low polarization conditions should be less than the other two conditions; significant difference between conditions 3 & 4
3	Low polarization, no partisan references	

## METHODS & DATA

To test these hypotheses, I recruited a total of 270 undergraduate students from Northwestern University in November 2011 to participate in a laboratory experiment, described as a study about how they think and feel about American politics. Students participated in the study to fulfill a course requirement as part of a subject pool in the political science department. They received no remuneration as a result of their participation other than fulfilling a course requirement for their political science course. Student samples are not *necessarily* inferior samples and are widely used in social



experimentation across disciplines (for a much more detailed, extensive discussion of this point, see Druckman & Kam 2010).<sup>11</sup> Students attended an in-person session using a university computer laboratory, lasting approximately 30-35 minutes, during which they took an online survey on university computers.

My focus is on in-party partisans in this case, since the videos are of speeches given by President Obama, a Democrat; as a result, my hypotheses address Democrats and independent-leaning Democrats.<sup>12</sup> In the analysis below, I merge partisan identifiers with independent-leaning partisans. Following Levendusky's (2009a) experiment on partisan polarization, I exclude pure independents and merge those who identify themselves as leaning toward one party in with weak and strong partisans (also see, e.g., Druckman 2001; Baum and Groeling 2009; Bullock 2011). In other words, independent-leaning partisans typically think and behave much like partisans themselves, in both opinion holding and vote choice (Lascher & Korey 2011). While studies focus on this phenomenon in participation studies, the merging of partisans and leaners here is a logical choice.<sup>13</sup> In total, there were 24 sessions, each of which were randomly assigned

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<sup>11</sup> Student samples are very common in political science; for additional examples, see Nelson et al. 1997, Druckman and Nelson 2003, Miller and Krosnick 2000, Druckman et al. 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Of the 270 participants, 213 self-identified as Democrats or independents who lean toward the Democrats. The remaining 57 are either Republicans or pure independents and they did not constitute a large enough sample to include in the analyses. I follow similar work that also excludes pure independents (i.e. Levendusky 2010; Bullock 2011).

<sup>13</sup> This approach is typical insofar as independent leaners tend to act like closet partisans when it comes to opinions and vote choice and thus we treat them as partisans (e.g., Dennis 1992, Keith et al. 1992, Petrocik 2009). As suggested by Magleby, Nelson, & Westlye, (1) leaners vote more consistently for their preferred party than do weak partisans and (2) they are also as engaged or more engaged in politics than are weak partisans. Keith et al. (1992) show that leaners tend to be more educated, more interested in politics, and more politically aware than many partisan identifiers. They also were not neutral in their opinions about the political parties. In contrast,

to one of six experimental conditions listed below in Table 3. Each respondent watched all three Presidential videos in the experiment.

**TABLE 3: Experimental Conditions**

	<b>No partisan references</b>	<b>Partisan references</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>No prime</b>	Condition 1 (n=35)	Condition 2 (n=33)	68
<b>Prime for low level of partisanship</b>	Condition 3 (n=33)	Condition 4 (n=38)	71
<b>Prime for high level of partisanship</b>	Condition 5 (n=36)	Condition 6 (n=38)	74
<b>Total</b>	104	109	213

The experiment had two key manipulations: the level of partisanship primed and the presence of references made to partisanship. First, priming has been shown to be an effective method of changing the weights placed on different attributes of new information. The introduction of new information can change opinion without changing underlying attitudes by simply changing the considerations from which opinions are formed (Zaller 1992; Iyengar & Kinder 1998). Priming affects what is most accessible when respondents are asked to make a judgment (see Zaller & Feldman 1992). To prime partisan identity, I assigned respondents to 3 conditions: they either read a paragraph describing Washington D.C. elites as highly polarized, lowly polarized, or they read no paragraph (no prime). Full text of the primes is available in the appendix; below are key aspects of the primes.

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Pure Independents were typically the least educated group in the electorate, were among the most politically unaware and disinterested in campaigns or elections, and were inclined not to express an affinity toward the parties or the party system.

The **high partisanship** prime focuses on the high level of partisan disagreement in Washington:

President Obama often talks about how difficult it is for the two parties to work together in Washington D.C. Like many, he recognizes the parties are just fundamentally in disagreement. For example, on November 3, 2010 Obama said, “We’re going to have to say there are some issues there there’s just too much disagreement to get this done right now.” Further, he recently added, “There is nothing wrong with our country. There is something wrong with our politics. There is just something wrong with our politics that we need to fix.”

The **low partisanship** prime read:

In the 2011 State of the Union Address, President Obama said, ‘New Laws will only pass with support for Democrats and Republicans. We will move forward together, or not at all- for the challenges we face are bigger than party and bigger than politics.’ In short, other than a few exceptions (that seem to get all the attention), Democrats and Republicans work together to pass important legislation. This reflects most voters who say they do indeed look past partisanship to substance.

For the **no prime** condition, the page simply states, “Please watch the following three short video clips of speeches given by President Obama.”

To show the experiment successfully manipulates the level of partisanship, Table 4 below shows a manipulation check of strength of partisanship by condition. As expected, conditions 5 and 6 (high partisanship conditions) had a significantly stronger mean of party strength and frequency of respondents identifying as “very strong Democrats.” There were no respondents who identified as either a very weak or weak Democrat. Conversely, the low partisanship conditions (4 and 3) contained no very strong Democrats and a significantly higher proportion of respondents who identified as very weak or weak Democrats. As expected, the no prime conditions were between the two extremes.

**TABLE 4: Manipulation check of primes on Strength of Party Identification**

Condition Number	Party Strength mean (standard deviation)	Frequency of very strong (%)	Frequency of Very weak+weak (%)

6	4.75 (.51)	25/32 (78.1%)	0/32 (0%)
5	4.64 (.78)	22/28 (78.6%)	0/28 (0%)
2	3.72 (.98)	5/25 (20.0%)	0/25 (0%)
1	3.59 (.98)	6/29 (20.7%)	0/29 (0%)
4	2.22 (.94)	0/32 (0%)	5/32 (15.6%)
3	1.19 (.92)	0/27 (0%)	15/27 (55.6%)

\*Scale ranges from 0-6, with 0= very weak and 6= very strong

For the second manipulation, I manipulate the content of the 3 video clips of speeches given by President Obama by including or excluding of references to party. Another way to increase partisan identity is including references to party (assuming attention is paid to watching the video). My first task was choosing the videos with President Obama discussing policy issues/areas. I chose three clips of Presidential speeches based on format and location; number of partisan references; and policy issues raised. First, in terms of format and location, I wanted to vary the context in which the President was speaking. As a result, the three videos highlight the President speaking at a campaign rally behind a "Campaign 2010" backdrop; at a podium from the White House in a press conference format; and at a site visit at an energy production company.

I chose videos that include content with timely, relevant political issues with which respondents would be familiar. The analyses below focus on two of the four issues raised in the videos. One of the videos focuses on energy policy and the environment, two issues where the parties diverge and that were prominent in the news, between increasing gas prices and the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in 2010 and its ramifications. The other two videos discussed other issues, health care and the economy, that were highly publicized issues because of the Affordable Care Act and federal spending and unemployment, respectively. I expect attitudes toward the environment

and energy policies to be most flexible given that attitudes about those two issues are less likely to be crystallized compared to health care and the economy.

For half of the conditions, respondents watched the unedited versions of the three videos as President Obama gave them, including roughly 5 partisan references in each of the videos. The other half watched essentially identical videos in which all references to party were removed. For example, any references about partisanship were removed, including “party (ies),” “Democrat(ic),” “Republican,” “conservative,” “liberal,” or any reference to an individual politician as long as their party affiliation was made clear in the reference. For additional detail on the content of the videos, see Appendix B. While there were minor differences between the videos given the editing, they included identical information in terms of the substance and content of the Presidential speeches. Respondents in all conditions watched three videos, either with or without reference to party and partisanship.

The videos are each approximately 3-4 minutes in length and respondents watched all three videos in every condition. Respondents first answered a battery of questions pertaining to demographics, political knowledge, media consumption; they then watched the three short clips of speeches given by President Barack Obama. After watching these videos, respondents answered additional questions regarding partisan identity and strength, affect and orientation toward political parties, and the dependent variables of interest: approval of the President; salience of the main issues the President addressed in the videos; and policy stances on the main issues the President addressed in the videos.

## **RESULTS**

### *Presidential Approval*

Tables 5 & 6 below show the mean of each condition and the statistical significance between pairs of conditions. Again, Presidential Approval is measured with three distinct thermometer ratings (see the Appendix for question wording) but for ease of presentation, an average of these three thermometer ratings is taken for a range of 0-100.<sup>14</sup> As suggested in H<sub>1</sub>, priming partisanship does, in fact, yield significantly different results in terms of Presidential approval. As shown in table 5, respondents in the high prime conditions (5&6) approved of the President significantly higher than those in the no prime conditions (1&2) who were still higher than those in the low partisanship conditions (3&4), supporting hypothesis 4. There is a significant difference between priming level. In other words, when respondents were primed to think the parties were sharply divergent, it activated their partisan identity and as a result, they approve of an in-party President significantly more- by roughly 10 points and 22 points, respectively (Table 5).

**TABLE 5: Means & Standard Deviations of Presidential Approval by Priming Level**

	Average Presidential Approval	T-test significance (compared to condition above)
<b>High Prime</b> (Conditions 5 & 6)	77.42 (14.26)	
<b>No Prime</b> (Conditions 1 & 2)	67.59 (12.01)	.00***
<b>Low Prime</b> (Conditions 3 & 4)	55.60 (13.37)	.00***

<sup>14</sup> The summative/average variable is highly correlated with each of the individual measures of Presidential approval, with Cronbach Alpha values of .95, .93, and .96 respectively.

\*Significance level: \*\*\*= $p < .01$ ; \*\*= $p < .05$ ; \*= $p < .10$ ; results are for a one-tailed test.

In terms of cues and content, hypotheses 2, 3, and 4 suggest that content should trump the source cue in the no prime and low partisanship conditions; the cue should dominate in the high partisanship conditions. In other words, I expect condition 4 to be significantly higher than condition 3 and condition 2 significantly higher than condition 1, with no significant difference between conditions 5 and 6. As shown below in Table 6, these hypotheses are all supported for Presidential approval. In the high partisan prime conditions, there is no difference between Presidential approval ratings in terms of comparing content (i.e. partisan references) as conditions 5 and 6 are not statistically different from each other. In the conditions where partisanship is primed less or not at all, content seems to matter more given that approval ratings for the President are higher in conditions with partisan references in the videos compared to those without (i.e. condition 2 is significantly greater than condition 1; condition 4 is significantly greater than condition 3). As expected, this suggests that when partisanship is strongly primed and partisan identity becomes more important to the respondent, the content of the Presidential speeches matters less; when partisanship is primed as being low or in a no prime condition, the content of the speech matters more.

**Table 6: Means & Standard Deviations of Presidential Approval by Condition**

Condition	Mean (Std. Dev)	T-test significance (compared to condition above)
6	77.85 (17.11)	
5	76.96 (10.67)	.40
2	70.09 (11.73)	.01***
1	65.23 (11.96)	.03**
4	60.59 (11.26)	.05**

3	49.86 (13.46)	.00***
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\*Significance level: \*\*\*= $p < .01$ ; \*\*= $p < .05$ ; \*= $p < .10$ ; results are for a one-tailed test.

### *Personal Importance*

As outlined in hypothesis 1, priming high elite polarization should have a significant effect on the perception of personal relevance of the issues raised by the President across level of primes. As Table 7 shows below, this is borne out in the results by priming level. For example, on the issue of the environment, respondents thought the issue was important in the high partisanship prime conditions ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SE = 0.67$ ) as compared to the no prime conditions ( $M = 2.71$ ,  $SE = 0.93$ ) and the low partisanship conditions ( $M = 1.54$ ,  $SE = 0.84$ ). Again,  $H_1$  is supported; priming high levels of polarization yield significantly higher measures of personal importance compared to priming low levels of polarization and no prime.

**TABLE 7: Means & Standard Deviations of Issue Importance by Priming Level\***

	Federal Spending & Economy (mean)	T-test significance (compared to condition above)	Health Care (mean)	T-test significance (compared to condition above)	Energy & Environment (mean)	T-test significance (compared to condition above)
<b>High Prime (Conditions 5 &amp; 6)</b>	3.47 (.67)		3.43 (.72)		3.36 (.80)	
<b>No Prime (Conditions 1 &amp; 2)</b>	2.71 (.93)	.00***	2.47 (.95)	.00***	2.69 (.90)	.00***
<b>Low Prime (Conditions 3 &amp; 4)</b>	1.54 (.84)	.00***	1.58 (.98)	.00***	1.49 (.79)	.00***

\*Importance Scale ranges from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (extremely important); results are for a one-tailed test.

Looking at the results by condition rather than by prime in Tables 8, 9, and 10,



the ordering is mostly as expected. Conditions 5 and 6 show higher levels of issue importance compared to conditions 1 and 2 for all three issues; conditions 1 and 2 are higher in issue importance compared to conditions 3 and 4. In other words, in the high partisanship conditions, each policy is seen as more important to personal priorities compared to the no prime conditions and the low partisanship conditions. For example, as shown below in Table 9, the mean for those in the high partisanship condition on the issue of health care is 3.43 compared to 2.47 for the no prime conditions and 1.58 for the low partisanship conditions. Again, in general, those in the high prime condition found the issues the President raised as more important to them in terms of their own personal priorities, higher than the no prime condition and the low prime condition<sup>15</sup>.

Turning to between-condition hypotheses ( $H_2$ ,  $H_3$ , and  $H_4$ ), there is no significant difference between conditions 5 and 6 for any of the three issues- spending and the economy, health care, and environment/energy issues (supporting Hypothesis 1). There were also no significant differences, however, between conditions 2 and 1 and conditions 4 and 3 for any of the three issues, rejecting Hypotheses 2 and 3 for issue importance. These results are initially surprising, suggesting that while the primes caused a significant difference in attitudes toward the importance of the issues raised by the President, the content of the speech did not.

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<sup>15</sup> When aggregated, there is no significant difference between videos with and without partisan references, with no significant differences between the conditions on any of the three issues measured- the environment, health care, and energy policy.

However, attitudes on certain public policy issues may already be crystalized and therefore, relatively resistant to persuasion. This is likely the case with these issues- particularly federal spending and health care, which are high salience, high-profile issues. The results are a bit more surprising for energy and the environment, however, given that I expected them to be lower in salience and more flexible. Surprisingly, there is no appreciable difference within priming levels in terms of partisan content, suggesting that hardened prior attitude may be affecting the results. Regardless, however, hypothesis 2 is supported: priming partisanship can affect issue importance.

**Table 8: Means & Standard Deviations of Issue Importance by Condition (Federal Spending)**

Condition	Mean (Std. Dev)	T-test significance (compared to condition above)
6	3.50 (.65)	
5	3.44 (.69)	.36
2	2.73 (1.01)	.00***
1	2.69 (.87)	.43
4	1.53 (.89)	.00***
3	1.55 (.79)	.46

\*Significance level: \*\*\*=p<.01; \*\*=p<.05; \*=p<.10; results are for a one-tailed test.

**Table 9: Means & Standard Deviations of Issue Importance by Condition (Health care)**

Condition	Mean (Std. Dev)	T-test significance (compared to condition above)
6	3.37 (.75)	
5	3.50 (.70)	.22
2	2.58 (1.06)	.00***
1	2.37 (.84)	.19
4	1.47 (1.03)	.00***
3	1.70 (.92)	.17

\*Significance level: \*\*\*=p<.01; \*\*=p<.05; \*=p<.10; results are for a one-tailed test.

**Table 10: Means & Standard Deviations of Issue Importance by Condition (Environment & Energy)**

Condition	Mean (Std. Dev)	T-test significance (compared to condition above)
6	3.32 (.87)	
5	3.42 (.73)	.30
2	2.82 (.85)	.00***
1	2.57 (.95)	.26
4	1.50 (.76)	.00***
3	1.48 (.83)	.47

\*Significance level: \*\*\*= $p < .01$ ; \*\*= $p < .05$ ; \*= $p < .10$ ; results are for a one-tailed test.

### *Issue stance*

Finally, the President may have an effect not only on the perception of personal importance but on the actual stance of the respondent as well. As previously mentioned, issue stance is measured with a seven-point scale, with a lower value corresponding to a more Democratic/liberal stance on the three issues at hand (see Appendix for exact question wording). As suggested by  $H_1$ , those in the high partisanship conditions had the most liberal (i.e. lowest mean value) stance on all three issues, followed by the no prime conditions, and finally the low prime conditions. In other words, as a result of priming partisanship, respondents in the high conditions had significantly more liberal issue orientations than those in the no prime or low prime conditions. Looking at the mean issue stance by prime level provides further evidence that hypothesis 1 is supported, showing the ordering is as expected. Conditions 3 and 4 show issue stances furthest from the Democratic/liberal stance (i.e. highest values), followed by conditions 1 and 2 in the middle, and conditions 5 and 6 with the most Democratic/liberal set of means (lowest values). This holds true for all three issues mentioned in the Presidential videos.

**TABLE 11: Means & Standard Deviations of Issue Stance by Priming Level**

	Federal spending	T-test significance (compared to condition above)	Health care	T-test significance (compared to condition above)	Environment	T-test significance (compared to condition above)
<b>High Prime (Conditions 5 &amp; 6)</b>	1.39 (1.48)		.68 (1.06)		1.81 (1.30)	
<b>No Prime (Conditions 1 &amp; 2)</b>	2.88 (1.55)	.00***	2.57 (1.20)	.00***	2.88 (1.38)	.00***
<b>Low Prime (Conditions 3 &amp; 4)</b>	3.99 (1.42)	.00***	3.54 (1.12)	.00***	4.31 (1.37)	.00***

\*Issue stance scale is 0-6, with 0 being the most liberal response and 6 being the most conservative response. Significance level: \*\*\*=p<.01; \*\*=p<.05; \*=p<.10; results are for a one-tailed test.

Finally, looking at between-condition hypotheses, as Tables 12, 13, and 14 show below, H<sub>2</sub> is supported, with no statistically significant differences between conditions 5 and 6 on any of the three issues. Again, this suggests that in the high partisanship conditions, the source cue dominates the content of the speeches. As expected, however, there are significant differences between conditions 2 and 1 on two of the three issues and significant differences between conditions 4 and 3 on all three of the issues. As a result, Hypotheses 2-4 are supported, suggesting that when polarization is either not primed or is primed as being low, there is a significant difference between videos that include and exclude partisan references, with the former resulting in an issue stance closer to the Democratic/liberal stance compared to the latter. Content of the speeches does have a significant effect in conditions with no prime or with a prime of lower partisanship, with stances shifting in the more liberal direction in some but nearly all of the issues. The one exception is that there is no statistically significant difference

between conditions 4 and 1 on issue stance for federal spending, though the direction is as expected.

**Table 12: Means & Standard Deviations of Issue Stance by Condition (Federal Spending)**

Condition	Mean (Std. Dev)	T-test significance (compared to condition above)
6	1.29 (1.43)	
5	1.50 (1.54)	.27
2	2.36 (1.52)	.01***
1	3.37 (1.44)	.00***
4	3.53 (1.41)	.32
3	4.52 (1.25)	.00***

\*Issue stance scale is 0-6, with 0 being the most liberal response and 6 being the most conservative response. Significance level: \*\*\*= $p < .01$ ; \*\*= $p < .05$ ; \*= $p < .10$ ; results are for a one-tailed test.

**Table 13: Means & Standard Deviations of Issue Stance by Condition (Health care)**

Condition	Mean (Std. Dev)	T-test significance (compared to condition above)
6	.64 (1.05)	
5	.71 (1.09)	.39
2	2.46 (1.22)	.00***
1	2.99 (1.19)	.08*
4	3.33 (1.08)	.02**
3	3.71 (1.14)	.07*

\*Issue stance scale is 0-6, with 0 being the most liberal response and 6 being the most conservative response. Significance level: \*\*\*= $p < .01$ ; \*\*= $p < .05$ ; \*= $p < .10$ ; results are for a one-tailed test.

**Table 14: Means & Standard Deviations of Issue Stance by Condition (Environment & Energy)**

Condition	Mean (Std. Dev)	T-test significance (compared to condition above)
6	1.74 (1.29)	
5	1.89 (1.33)	.31
2	2.42 (1.28)	.05**
1	3.31 (1.35)	.00***

4	3.76 (1.28)	.07*
3	4.94 (1.20)	.00***

\*Issue stance scale is 0-6, with 0 being the most liberal response and 6 being the most conservative response. Significance level: \*\*\*= $p < .01$ ; \*\*= $p < .05$ ; \*= $p < .10$ ; results are for a one-tailed test.

I also asked whether respondents are willing to provide their e-mail address to receive additional information on the policy issues from one of three sources- the Obama administration, the Republican Party, or an unbiased, independent source. I found no significant effect between conditions or primes for willingness to provide an e-mail address for information from the Obama administration or for information from an independent source. I did, however, find a significant difference ( $p = .07$ ) when comparing no prime conditions with all of the other conditions. This suggests that Democrats and independent-leaning Democrats were more likely to be willing to receive information from the Republican Party when in the no prime condition.

### DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that priming elite polarization can, in fact, affect partisan identity and identity strength. In turn, that increasingly important identity had an effect on individual-level attitude formation about the President, specifically for in-party partisans on Presidential approval, issue importance, and even issue stance.

De-emphasizing partisanship seems to make people more focused on content rather than the source cue, make them more open to information from Republicans. In most cases above, content trumped the cue (except in high polarizations conditions). Partisan

identity was so overwhelming in the high polarization conditions that it changed the focus of what people use to evaluate the President; source/partisanship is most important in high polarization conditions; content was more important in no prime and low polarization conditions. Presidents can shift opinion of themselves and the issues they choose among in-party partisans by appealing to polarization or otherwise heightening party identity. They can also shift a focus onto themselves as a cue as opposed to the content of their speeches in most but not all cases.

In sum, the President can continue to persuade in-party partisans by appealing to elite polarization. As evidenced by this study, in-party partisans can be induced to approve of the job the President is doing as well as to find the issues he raises as more persuasive and to be persuaded in that direction. Content does not seem to matter as much instances where partisanship is strongly primed; the source cue reigns. In most other conditions, on the other hand, reference to political partisanship does matter in conditions where partisanship is either lower salience or not primed whatsoever. Polarization changes the focus of what people use to evaluate the President-source/partisanship in high polarization conditions; content in no prime and low polarization conditions.

As political elites become more and more polarized, the degree to which we can expect meaningful political debate that transcends party lines may be decreasing. Moreover, prominent actors like the President of the United States may be losing the ability to persuade and may be relegated to attempting to persuade only those who already agree with them. This is troubling for a deliberative democracy and calls into

question the future of genuine political debate and a free exchange of ideas and acceptance of political differences. It also calls into question whether future Presidents will be able to alter or to lead public opinion across a wide swath of the American public as has often been the case in the past. Existing research provides empirical evidence of avoidance and ignorance of political differences; as a result, the likelihood of deep, meaningful political debate and of impactful Presidential rhetoric may be on the decline during times of elite polarization. Presidents do, however, retain the power of partisanship in changing Americans' individual attitudes about him and the issues he finds most important- not an inconsiderable feat for contemporary Presidential leadership.



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**APPENDIX A: ADDITIONAL TABLES**

**TABLE 15: Descriptives of DVs (Democrats and leaners only)**

	Mean	SD	Min/Max
Approval 1 (0-100)	66.96	16.76	17/99
Approval 2 (0-100)	64.36	18.73	15/100
Approval 3 (0-100)	69.70	17.09	19/100
Average Approval (average of 3 measures)	67.01	16.01	17/99.33
Issue stance (federal spending)	2.73	1.83	0/6
Issue stance (health care)	2.23	1.65	0/6
Issue stance (environment)	2.99	1.69	0/6
Issue importance (environment)	2.58	1.14	0/4
Issue importance (health care)	2.51	1.17	0/4
Issue importance (energy)	2.53	1.14	0/4

\*Issue stance scale is 0-6, with 0 being the most liberal response and 6 being the most conservative response. Issue importance scale is 0-4, with 0 being not at all important and 4 being extremely important.

**TABLE 16: Across condition means (Presidential Approval Thermometers)**

Condition Number	Standard Approval Question	Issues Approval Question	Feeling Thermometer
6	77.42	75.42	80.71
5	75.97	74.47	80.44
2	70.42	66.73	73.12
1	67.26	62.00	66.43
4	62.71	56.63	62.42
3	46.21	49.61	53.76

**TABLE 17: Across condition means (Personal Relevance)**

Condition Number	Personal Importance (Environment)	Personal Importance (Health care)	Personal Importance (Energy)
6	3.50	3.37	3.32
5	3.44	3.50	3.42
2	2.73	2.58	2.82
1	2.69	2.37	2.57
4	1.53	1.47	1.50
3	1.55	1.70	1.48

\*Importance Scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely)

**TABLE 18: Across condition means (Issue Stance)\***

Condition Number	Issue stance	Issue stance	Issue stance
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	(Federal spending/taxes)	(Health care)	(Environment)
6	4.71	5.29	4.26
5	4.50	5.36	4.11
2	3.64	3.30	3.58
1	2.63	3.54	2.69
4	2.47	2.29	2.24
3	1.48	2.67	1.06

\*Scale from 1-7, higher numbers= more Democratic/liberal position)

### Post-Hoc Comparisons (Bonferroni Corrections)

#### *Presidential Approval (average)*

TABLE 19: Post-Hoc Comparisons for Approval (Bonferroni Correction)

Level of priming (I)	Level of Priming (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard Error	Significance
No prime	Low prime	13.75	2.41	.00
	High prime	-7.92	2.38	.00
Low prime	High Prime	-21.67	2.35	.00

#### *Issue Importance*

TABLE 20: Post-Hoc Comparisons for Environment (Bonferroni Correction)

Level of priming (I)	Level of Priming (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard Error	Significance
No prime	Low prime	1.17	.14	.00
	High prime	-.77	.14	.00
Low prime	High Prime	-1.938	.14	.00

TABLE 21: Post-Hoc Comparisons for Health Care (Bonferroni Correction)

Level of priming (I)	Level of Priming (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard Error	Significance
No prime	Low prime	.89	.15	.00
	High prime	-.96	.15	.00
Low prime	High Prime	-1.86	.15	.00

TABLE 22: Post-Hoc Comparisons for Energy (Bonferroni Correction)

Level of priming (I)	Level of Priming (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard Error	Significance
No prime	Low prime	1.20	.14	.00
	High prime	-.67	.14	.00
Low prime	High Prime	-1.87	.14	.00

*Issue Stance***TABLE 23: Post-Hoc Comparisons for Federal Spending (Bonferroni Correction)**

<b>Level of priming (I)</b>	<b>Level of Priming (J)</b>	<b>Mean Difference (I-J)</b>	<b>Standard Error</b>	<b>Significance</b>
<b>No prime</b>	Low prime	1.10	.25	.00
	High prime	-1.49	.25	.00
<b>Low prime</b>	High Prime	-2.59	.25	.00

**TABLE 24: Post-Hoc Comparisons for Health Care (Bonferroni Correction)**

<b>Level of priming (I)</b>	<b>Level of Priming (J)</b>	<b>Mean Difference (I-J)</b>	<b>Standard Error</b>	<b>Significance</b>
<b>No prime</b>	Low prime	.96	.19	.00
	High prime	-1.90	.19	.00
<b>Low prime</b>	High Prime	-2.86	.19	.00

**TABLE 25: Post-Hoc Comparisons for Environment (Bonferroni Correction)**

<b>Level of priming (I)</b>	<b>Level of Priming (J)</b>	<b>Mean Difference (I-J)</b>	<b>Standard Error</b>	<b>Significance</b>
<b>No prime</b>	Low prime	1.428	.23	.00
	High prime	1.07	.23	.00
<b>Low prime</b>	High Prime	2.50	.22	.00

## APPENDIX B: PRESIDENTIAL VIDEO CONTENT

### Video 1:

- i. **Topic:** Republicans will make the country fall backward economically; special interests and wealthy Americans have disproportionate influence
- ii. **Unedited version:** 6 partisan references total (2 to Republicans (negative); 3 “the other side;” 1 to Democrats).
- iii. **Edited version:** 0 partisan references

### Video 2:

- i. **Topic:** The Affordable Care Act will help the middle class and is fiscally responsible; it offers flexibility of coverage and respects states’ rights
- ii. **Unedited version:** 6 partisan references (2 to Republicans (Mitt Romney and Scott Brown); 2 to Democrats (Ron Wyden and Mary Landrieu); 1 to divisiveness in Washington; 1 to Democrats and Republicans disagreeing)
- iii. **Edited version:** 0 partisan references

### Video 3:

- i. **Topic:** We need a blended energy policy that includes wind, solar, and other alternative sources; we need to reduce dependence on foreign oil and encourage American innovation and technology
- ii. **Unedited version:** 4 partisan references (2 to Republicans and Democrats; 2 to Washington politics and divisiveness)
- iii. **Edited version:** 0 partisan references

## **APPENDIX C: QUESTION WORDING OF DEPENDENT VARIABLES**

Below is the precise question wording for measurement of the dependent variables.

1. Presidential Approval
  - a. On a scale from 0 to 100, at what level do you approve of President Barack Obama's job performance? Zero means disapprove strongly, and 100 means approve strongly. Fifty means you do not approve or disapprove. Of course you can use any number between zero and 100.
  - b. On a scale from 0 to 100, how much do you approve of President Barack Obama's attention to the issues that matter to people like you? Zero means disapprove strongly, and 100 means approve strongly. Fifty means you do not approve or disapprove. Of course you can use any number between zero and 100.
  - c. On a scale from 0 to 100, how do you feel about President Barack Obama? Zero means very unfavorable, and 100 means very favorable. Fifty means you do not feel favorable or unfavorable. Of course you can use any number between zero and 100.
  
2. Personal Importance
  - a. How do you rate the importance of federal spending and the economy in terms of your own personal priorities? (This was the topic of video 1). Responses: Not at all important, slightly important, moderately important, very important, extremely important
  - b. On a scale of 1-7, how do you rate the importance of health care reform in terms of your own personal priorities? (This was the topic of video 2). Responses: Not at all important, slightly important, moderately important, very important, extremely important
  - c. On a scale of 1-7, how do you rate the importance of energy and energy production in terms of your own personal priorities? (This is the topic of video 3). Responses: Not at all important, slightly important, moderately important, very important, extremely important
  
3. Issue stance
  - a. In general, what do you think is more important: the federal government maintaining spending levels and raising taxes for some OR cutting government spending without any increases in taxes? Responses: Definitely maintain spending and raise taxes /very maintain spending and raise taxes /probably maintain spending and raise taxes /equally important/probably cut spending and don't raise taxes/very likely cut spending and don't raise taxes /definitely cut spending and don't raise taxes
  - b. In general, what do you think is more important: the federal government requiring an individual mandate and making sure everyone has access to

health care OR the federal government staying out of health care entirely and maintaining a market based system? Responses: Definitely individual mandate and equal access /very likely individual mandate and equal access /probably individual mandate and equal access/equally important/probably establish market based system prosperous economy; very likely establish market based system /definitely establish market based system

- c. In general, what do you think is more important: protecting the environment, even at the risk of curbing economic growth, OR maintaining a prosperous economy, even if the environment suffers to some extent? Responses: Definitely protect environment/very likely protect environment/probably protect environment/equally important/probably maintain prosperous economy; very likely maintain prosperous economy/definitely maintain prosperous economy