

# Civic Duty and Political Preference Formation

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## Abstract

While a sense of civic duty has long been perceived as important for political participation, little is known about its implications for political preference formation. I argue that civic duty has salubrious effects for opinion formation by dampening partisan distortions in decision making. I theorize that a heightened sense of civic duty stimulates a motivation to form “accurate” opinions and, in doing so, diminishes the effects of partisan motivated reasoning. Using survey experiments focused on tax and education policies, I provide evidence that when civic norms are accentuated, at times, people shirk party endorsements and incorporate substantive policy information in preference formation. The implications for citizen competence and public opinion in democratic politics are discussed.

## Keywords

motivated reasoning, civic duty, partisanship, public opinion

You cannot move him then with good straight talk about service and civic duty.

—Lippmann ([1927] 2002)

The importance of partisanship for political attitude formation has long been established (A. Campbell et al. 1960). As the citizenry tries to make sense of politics and what Lippmann ([1927] 2002, 24) referred to as the “swarming confusion of problems,” they often look to political parties for cues (Popkin 1991). Yet, some research suggests that party cues dominate policy information in decision making (Cohen 2003). Furthermore, there is evidence that preference formation is distorted by partisan attachments (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Goren 2002). This literature argues that rather than objectively evaluating policy information, people seek out information that reinforces their party’s policy positions and counterargue messages that challenge their party. Considerable weight is thus given to elite party endorsements in information processing and may lead a Democrat to support a policy proposed by Democrats, but oppose the same policy if proposed by Republicans. As such, these findings raise normative concerns about the capacity of the electorate to hold representatives accountable in democratic politics (Druckman 2012).

However, the influence of partisanship is not without limits. I suggest that a *sense of civic duty* has the potential to attenuate partisan distortions in attitude formation. Civic norms have long been viewed as instrumental for

political behavior (A. Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954; Riker and Ordeshook 1968). A sense of civic duty—a construct often representing an amalgamation of civic norms and expectations for what it means to be a “good” citizen—is central to many explanations of political participation (Blais 2000; A. Campbell et al. 1960; D. E. Campbell 2006; Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008; Knack 1992; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Michelson 2003; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). Despite the voluminous literature on the linkage between civic duty and voter turnout, scant attention has been given to the role of civic duty in political preference formation.

Civic duty is comprised of several underlying civic norms that map onto a notion of *obligation to others*—which is closely linked to accountability and cognitive effort in making “correct” decisions (Tetlock 1983). In addition, a sense of civic duty encourages people to process information in a way that coheres with normative expectations concerning open-minded information search (Kam 2007). Building on these insights, I theorize that civic duty triggers accuracy motivations—a drive to evaluate information in a manner that will lead to a “correct” opinion (Kunda 1990). As such, a heightened sense of civic duty should prompt people to more objectively

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consider relevant policy information and partisan distortions in preference formation should be mitigated.

Previous research suggests that when civic norms are made salient, people hold party identities more reflective of their issue positions (Groenendyk 2013), but the extant literature has yet to directly assess the ability of civic duty to dampen the influence of elite party cues in the formation of policy preferences. I argue that a heightened sense of civic duty will lead people to shirk party endorsements in attitude formation and, in doing so, reduce polarization in policy preferences.

I test hypotheses with survey experiments focused on tax and education policies. The results reveal that when civic duty norms are made salient, partisans do not blindly follow their party's position. In addition, contexts that amplify a sense of civic duty attenuate partisan distortions in how people evaluate political arguments, and increase willingness to discuss the policy with people from the opposing party. Individual-level variation in a sense of civic duty affects the degree to which people follow party endorsements, but these effects are more pronounced among Republicans. I conclude with a discussion of the implications for partisanship and voter competence.

## Partisanship and Preference Formation

Many dynamics shape political preference formation, but a central element is party identification. A. Campbell et al. (1960, 133) suggest, "Identification with a party raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation." Party cues, at times, provide efficient and reliable decision-making heuristics (Downs 1957; Popkin 1991), but people follow cues even at the expense of relevant information (Cohen 2003). Furthermore, research suggests that people engage in partisan motivated reasoning (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Dickerson and Ondercin 2017; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012).<sup>1</sup> This literature argues that people are motivated to defend their party and its policy positions. As such, people tend to seek out information that bolsters their party's positions (i.e., confirmation bias), counterargue messages that challenge their party (i.e., disconfirmation bias), and ultimately follow their party's endorsements. In doing so, political information is not evaluated evenhandedly, but rather is filtered through a partisan lens.

Research shows that motivated reasoning is moderated by individual-level differences in political sophistication (Taber and Lodge 2006), attitude strength (Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009), and ambivalence (Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012). Yet, context also

matters. For example, studies demonstrate that partisan motivated reasoning is contingent on elite polarization (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013) and that partisan economic perceptions are moderated by local and macroeconomic variables (Chzhen, Evans, and Pickup 2014; Dickerson 2016; Dickerson and Ondercin 2017).

Still other research suggests that partisan motivations are constrained by accuracy motivations (Leeper and Slothuus 2014). Accuracy motivations refer to a drive to "carefully consider relevant evidence so as to reach a correct or otherwise best conclusion" (Taber and Lodge 2006, 756). Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook (2014, 238) note, "What the 'best outcome' entails, is of course, not always clear. One criterion might be that individuals consider all the available information and not ignore potentially relevant arguments in order to form an evaluation consistent with one's partisan identity." If accuracy motivations are sufficiently salient, they can mitigate the effects of partisan motivations (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Druckman 2012; Kunda 1990). However, there remains skepticism about the extent to which accuracy motivations exist (Taber and Lodge 2012). I argue that a heightened sense of civic duty has the potential to activate accuracy motivations and fundamentally alter preference formation.

## Civic Duty

For decades, political behavior scholars have examined civic norms (A. Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954)—the "shared set of expectations about the citizen's role in politics" and "what people think people should do as good citizens" (Dalton 2008a, 78; see also Almond and Verba 1963). Perhaps the most common construct representing a unification of citizenship norms is a sense of *civic duty*.<sup>2</sup> Table 1 in the Supplementary Materials outlines ways in which civic duty has been conceptualized in dozens of publications. Despite its diverse applications, there is a consensus that civic duty embodies what people perceive as the shared norms for how a citizen should behave in democratic politics.

While some analyses of civic duty restrict its conceptualization to a single norm such as an obligation to participate in politics (A. Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954; Knack 1992; Riker and Ordeshook 1968) or an obligation to be informed (McCombs and Poindexter 1983; Poindexter and McCombs 2001), a wealth of literature employs measurements that deliberately tap into the multiple and diverse norms underlying perceptions of "good" citizenship and civic duty (D. E. Campbell 2006; Dalton 2008a, 2008b; Denters, Gabriel, and Torcal 2007; Groenendyk 2013; Klemmensen et al. 2012; Weinschenk 2014).<sup>3</sup> When citizens are asked to elaborate on their perceptions of citizen duties, civic norms are viewed as

multidimensional and complex (Conover, Crewe, and Searing 1991; Conover, Leonard, and Searing 1993), and as such much of this research suggests that incorporating multiple norms into an understanding of civic duty is essential.

For example, Dalton (2008a, 2008b) and Groenendyk (2013) employ a conceptualization of citizenship norms that encompass the four most common civic norms. First, there is a *participation* norm that refers to how important people think various participatory behaviors (broadly defined, that is, voting, volunteering, being active in social or political associations, etc.) are to be a good citizen. The second norm, *autonomy*, suggests that citizens be sufficiently informed to exercise a participatory role. Dalton (2008a, 79) states, “The good citizen should participate in democratic deliberation and discuss politics with other citizens, and ideally understand the views of others.” Dalton is not alone in highlighting autonomy and the informed and deliberative aspects of citizenship (Dahl 1998; Warren 2001). Discussing autonomy, Warren (2001, 60) states that “preferences should not be the result of manipulation or received opinion but rather the result of considered adherence.” Warren (2001, 63) argues that autonomy “has to do with individuals’ capacities to take part in critical examination of self and others, to participate in reasoning processes, and to arrive at judgments they can defend in public argument.”

Dalton’s third norm includes a commitment to *social order* and an acceptance of state authority and laws, while the fourth norm surrounds *solidarity* and an ethical and moral responsibility to others in the polity and beyond—such as supporting people worse off than oneself. Thus, civic norms refer to the shared expectations of how “good” citizens should behave in democratic politics. The participatory consequences of civic obligations receive the bulk of attention in scholarly literature, but civic duty norms may also alter how people form preferences.

I argue that when conceptualized as an amalgamation of norms as discussed above, an elevated sense of civic duty alters preference formation by stimulating accuracy motivations. Kam (2007, 19) asserts that the “concept of citizen duty maps onto” a “notion of obligation to others.” The notion of *an obligation to others* and perceived social and political obligations is apparent in measures of civic duty norms (see Table 1 in the Supplementary Materials). Measures of the participation norm tap into perceptions of obligations to vote and be active in associations, and the autonomy norm assesses the extent to which people feel obligated to understand the reasoning of other people. Perceived obligations to obey laws and serve others, such as serving on a jury and in the military, are captured in the social order norm, while the importance people attach to

supporting others who are worse off than themselves is woven into measures of the solidarity norm. Almond and Verba ([1963], 1989, 53) state that an integral component of a civic culture is that citizens have “a sense of obligation to participate in political activities.” Loewen and Dawes (2012, 364) even define civic duty as “a belief that an individual has an obligation to undertake actions that benefit others.” I emphasize the linkage between *civic duty* and an *obligation to others* because an obligation to others is known to increase “cognitive effort” and accountability increases the “importance of avoiding ‘bad’ judgments (embarrassment, loss of self-esteem) and of making ‘good’ judgments (praise, status)” (Tetlock 1983, 74; see also Kam 2007).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, to increase cognitive effort and encourage reliance on complex decision rules, experiments commonly generate accountability by telling respondents they will have to justify the reasons for their judgments to others (e.g., Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014). Thus, a heightened sense of civic duty may, by way of stimulating an obligation to others and accountability, increase effort exerted in making “good” judgments.

Yet, heightened cognitive effort is not synonymous with unbiased information processing. Indeed, if the effort is put toward counterarguing and disconfirmation biases, it may result in attitude reinforcement. However, importantly, I suggest that civic duty prompts not only more effortful but also more open-minded information processing. A key component of civic duty is the importance people attach to the idea that preferences should be the result of a close consideration of information and the reasoning of others (Warren 2001). Research suggests that a sense of civic obligation is a strong predictor of information seeking (McCombs and Poindexter 1983; Poindexter and McCombs 2001). Blumler and McQuail (1969, 82) write,

It is not only voting, but also the attempt on their part to acquire information about some problems facing the country, that electors regard as a duty . . . an imminent campaign will draw the attention of voters to the roles they are supposed to fulfill as citizens and thus encourage a measure of “obligatory” information seeking.

Buttressing this argument, Kam (2007, 17) finds that subtle reminders of citizen duty within campaign discourse prompt people to learn candidates’ issue positions, to think more about the candidates, and “to search for information in an open-minded way.”<sup>5</sup>

The combination of increased effort and motivation to make “good” judgments *and* more open-minded information search are consistent with definitions of accuracy motivations (see Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Kunda 1990). A heightened sense of civic duty should

encourage people to pay attention to policy information and more evenhandedly evaluate arguments. As with other accuracy motivation research, the activation of civic duty should lead people to “seek a more diverse set of viewpoints” (Pietryka 2016). In doing so, the effects of partisan motivated reasoning and counterarguing of competing partisan messages should be mitigated. When civic norms are activated and made salient, people should be less inclined to blindly follow the policy positions of their preferred party and instead make more considered evaluations of information.<sup>6</sup>

## Hypotheses

Consistent with research on partisan motivated reasoning (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012; Petersen et al. 2013), partisans should be more supportive of their preferred party’s policy position when elite party endorsements are present than when they are absent. Goren, Federico, and Kittilson (2009, 806) assert, “When someone hears a recognizable partisan source advocating some position, her partisan leanings are activated, which in turn lead her to evaluate the message through a partisan lens.” If partisans engage in partisan motivated reasoning, there should be evidence of disconfirmation bias and counterarguing (Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009). That is, partisans should view an argument as more effective when endorsed by their party.

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Partisans are more likely to engage in partisan motivated reasoning—as evidenced by the influence of party endorsements on policy preferences and argument evaluations—when party endorsements are present than when they are absent.

Yet, if a political environment or message accentuates a sense of civic duty, partisan motivated reasoning should be diminished. When made salient, civic duty norms should catalyze open-minded information search and prompt accuracy motivated reasoning. In doing so, people should focus on the substantive policy information and be less inclined to engage in partisan motivated reasoning. As such, when civic duty is made salient, partisans should be less likely to blindly follow their preferred party’s policy position.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** Partisans who receive reminders of their civic duty will be less likely to engage in partisan motivated reasoning—as evidenced by the influence of party endorsements on policy preferences and argument evaluations—than people who do not receive these reminders.

When people engage in motivated reasoning, arguments for and against a policy are filtered in a manner that leads to more polarized attitudes (Taber and Lodge 2006). If the presence of partisan endorsements promotes partisan motivated reasoning (H1), then the policy preferences of Democrats and Republicans should, on average, become more polarized (i.e., farther apart). However, if civic duty stimulates accuracy motivated reasoning and attenuates the effects of partisan motivated reasoning, polarization should be mitigated.

**Hypothesis 3a (H3a):** Partisans will, on average, be more polarized when party endorsements are present than when they are absent.

**Hypothesis 3b (H3b):** Partisans will, on average, be less polarized when party endorsements are accompanied by reminders of civic duty than when endorsements alone are presented.

## Design

To test hypotheses, I employ survey experiments that vary two features of policy information. First, I vary the presence or absence of party endorsements, and if present, whether the party endorsement is the party’s traditional position (i.e., position in reality) or a completely reversed position. Consistent with existing literature (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Mullinix 2016; Robison and Mullinix 2016), this is done to test the extent to which people engage in partisan motivated reasoning. The inclusion of not only traditional party positions but also reversed party endorsements allows for an assessment of the extent to which people follow their preferred party’s policy position ostensibly at the expense of relevant policy information (Cohen 2003).

Second, I vary the presence or absence of a message designed to trigger civic duty norms. While a sense of civic duty varies between individuals and may have a heritable component (Loewen and Dawes 2012), it is primarily shaped by one’s environment. A long line of research examines the extent to which schools and communities alter the development of civic norms (D. E. Campbell 2006; Litt 1963).<sup>7</sup> Emphasizing the important role of context for civic duty, Klemmensen et al. (2012, 424) argue, “Socialization, acculturation and other environmental factors are still the best candidates when explaining variations in civic duty.” If civic duty is, in part, a function of one’s political context, it may be possible to alter its salience via experimental manipulation.

Thus, I manipulate party endorsements to trigger partisan motivated reasoning and trigger civic duty norms to determine whether a sense of civic duty can attenuate the influence of partisanship on policy preferences.

Varying party endorsements (none, traditional, reversed) and the presence or absence of a civic duty cue (absent, present) produces a  $3 \times 2$  six-condition experimental design. These variations in policy information allow for analyses of the effects of party endorsements (H1) and the extent to which accentuating civic duty diminishes these effects (H2).

### *Samples and Stimuli*

The survey experiments were implemented, concerning two issues, with a general population sample in June 2014 with *Survey Sampling International* (SSI). The SSI sample is designed to be representative of the U.S. adult population.<sup>8</sup> SSI maintains an opt-in panel of survey respondents with samples drawn using a matching algorithm. As with related work (Bullock 2011; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013), pure Independents are excluded and analyses are restricted to 1,122 partisans including partisan “leaners” who are known to be similar to partisans in vote choice and policy preferences (Lascher and Korey 2011; Magleby et al. 2011).<sup>9</sup> Experimental stimuli, randomized by condition, were in the form of news articles. People were randomized to one of the six conditions and received an article (that matched their condition), answered questions about the issue, received a second article (that matched their condition), and again answered a series of questions. Consistent with similar work, condition number was held constant between the two articles (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014).<sup>10</sup>

The two articles focus separately on a Republican proposal to simultaneously cut income taxes and increase sales taxes, and the Republican proposed “Student Success Act” to increase local control and reduce the federal government’s role in education policy. For external validity, both articles were based on real policy proposals discussed in the *New York Times* (see Rich 2013; Stevenson 2013). All respondents, regardless of experimental condition, receive a basic description of the policy and arguments both for and against the policy. The issues were selected to test hypotheses with respect to two important but distinct policy domains: taxes and education. Proponents of decreasing income taxes and increasing sales taxes (Republicans in reality) argued that the measure would “attract professionals with high incomes” while opponents (Democrats) suggested that the benefits are “not uniform because cuts to the income tax will benefit some more than others.” Proponents of the Student Success Act (Republicans) stated, “it shifts authority away from the federal government by leaving decisions . . . to states and local districts,” while opponents (Democrats) “worry that localizing education standards and reducing the role of government will provide some students with an inferior education.” Although

respondents may not be extremely familiar with these specific proposals, taxes and education are certainly topics for which many partisans have prior attitudes. As such, these issues likely present a conservative test for the extent to which people are susceptible to the influence of party and civic duty cues (see Ciuk and Yost 2016).

As noted above, there are two dimensions on which the information about the policies is manipulated. First, I vary party endorsements (none, traditional, or reversed) to trigger partisan motivated reasoning. In traditional party endorsement conditions, respondents are informed of which party proposed (Republican) and which party opposed (Democratic) the legislation in reality. In reversed party endorsement conditions, the party cues are simply flipped. Absent the civic duty manipulation, I anticipate that people will engage in partisan motivated reasoning and be more supportive of their party’s position when endorsements are present than when they are absent.

Second, I vary whether respondents receive a cue designed and pretested to accentuate civic duty norms. As discussed above, civic duty norms have been conceptualized and measured in different ways (see Table 1 in the Supplementary Materials). Consistent with much of this literature, I build the civic duty stimulus on a multidimensional approach to civic duty. I designed a stimulus that captured the four most common civic duty norms (Dalton 2008a, 2008b; Groenendyk 2013): participation, autonomy, social order, and solidarity. To do so, I had an artificial source (e.g., Mark Jenkins, professor of public policy at Stanford University)—designed to be perceived as credible—make statements that encourage these civic norms. To ensure conceptual integrity, I took the typical measures of each of these civic norms (see Table 1 in the Supplementary Materials) and simply converted them into statements and attributed them to the source (see the appendix for text of treatment).<sup>11</sup> Importantly, pretests reveal that the manipulation significantly increased the importance people attach to these civic norms (see Supplementary Materials for results of pretests).

### *Measures*

There are two primary dependent variables. Each question was asked immediately after the participant read the article and was designed to assess respondents’ policy preferences on each issue. For the tax proposal, participants were asked, “Given this information, to what extent do you support increasing sales taxes relative to income taxes (increasing sales taxes and decreasing income taxes)?” This wording was selected because it was a single policy proposal that was comprised of both elements (simultaneously cutting income taxes while increasing sales taxes). For the Student Success Act article, participants were asked, “Given this information, to what extent

do you support the proposed ‘Student Success Act?’” For each issue, they responded from 1 (*strongly oppose*) to 11 (*strongly support*).

To determine whether people were engaged in motivated reasoning and whether there was evidence of disconfirmation bias and counterarguing, participants also rated the effectiveness of arguments (see Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009). Participants were asked, “How effective or ineffective did you find the main argument *in favor* of . . . (and the argument *opposed* to . . .)” from (1 very ineffective) to 7 (very effective). If motivated reasoning is occurring, there should be evidence of distortions—consistent with disconfirmation bias—in how people evaluate the effectiveness of arguments.

I present results in two ways. First, I present, in-text,  $p$  values and difference-in-means results from  $t$ -tests for comparisons between the relevant experimental conditions.<sup>12</sup> Appendix Table A1 shows differences in means between treatment conditions and control groups. Second, I present the results from ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models controlling for other variables in the Supplementary Materials. Based on these regression models, I graphically present, in-text, the linear prediction of policy support by experimental condition holding other variables constant.

## Results

Partisan motivated reasoning suggests that people seek out information that reinforces their preferred party’s policy positions while counterarguing messages that challenge their party’s positions. Simple exposure to partisan endorsements is often sufficient to trigger such partisan distortions in information processing (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Goren, Federico, and Kittilson 2009). If people engage in partisan motivated reasoning, they should become more supportive of their preferred party’s policy position when endorsements are present than when they are absent (H1). However, if the civic duty prompt stimulates accuracy motivated reasoning, partisan endorsements should have little effect (H2).

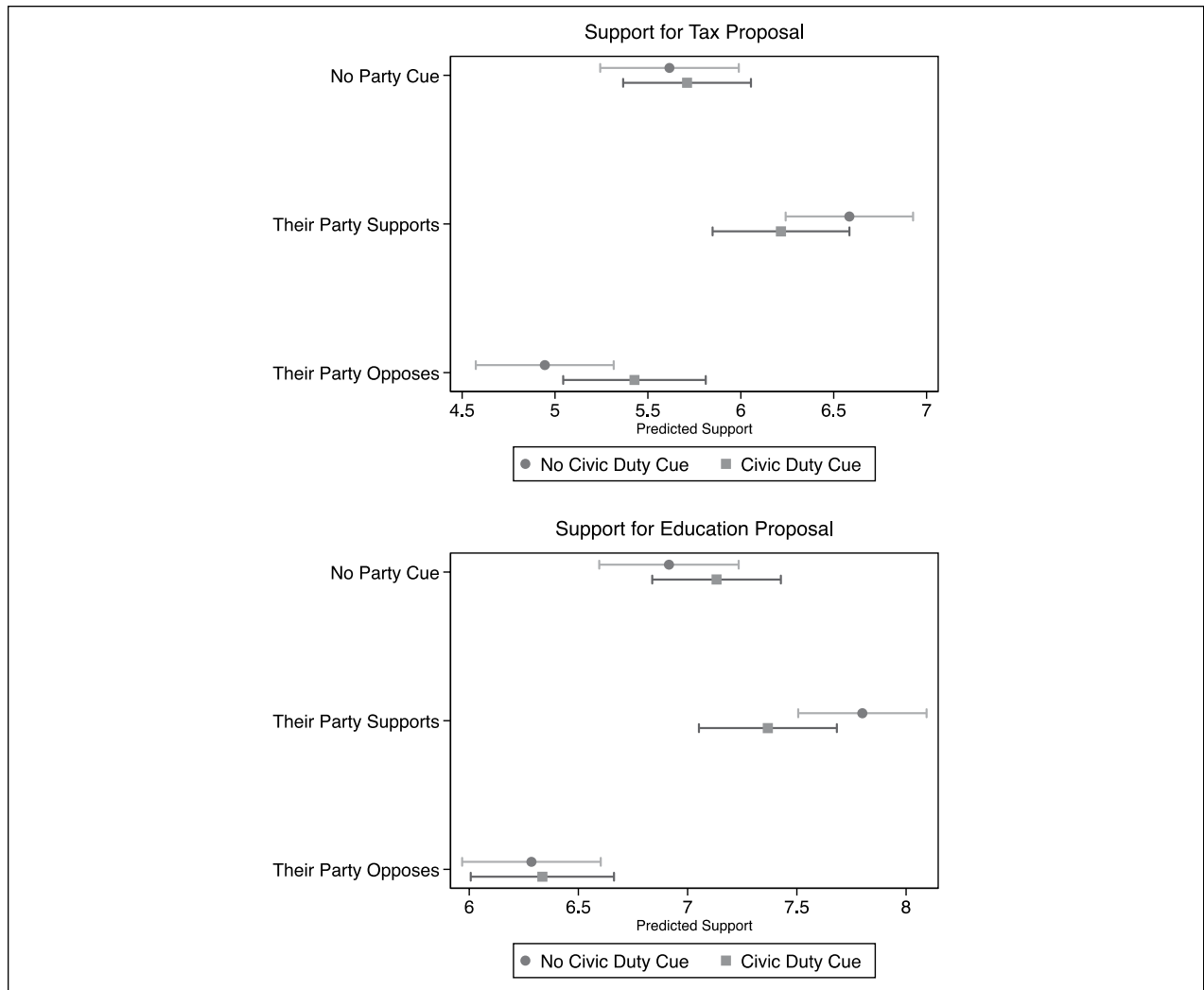
Figure 1 shows the predicted support for each policy broken down by experimental condition. Here, respondents are simply categorized by whether their preferred party supported or opposed the policy proposal or whether no party cue was provided. As with related work, I break all results down by partisanship in Figures 2 and 3 (see Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). In doing so, I can more directly assess the effects of the traditional and reversed party endorsements and whether there are asymmetries between partisans across experimental conditions.

## Party Endorsements

I begin by assessing whether people are more supportive of their party’s position when endorsements are present than when they are absent—in the absence of the civic duty cue. Comparing the no party cue condition with the party cue conditions provides a simple test of party endorsement effects because the only difference between these conditions is the presence or absence of party endorsements. In Figure 1, partisans are categorized by whether their party supports or opposes the policy proposal or whether they did not receive a party endorsement. Consistent with H1, when respondents are told that lawmakers from their preferred party support these policies, they become significantly more supportive of both proposals than when no party cue is provided (Tax:  $p < .001$ , Education:  $p < .001$ ). Indeed, they are about 1 point more supportive of each policy when provided the party endorsement. Conversely, when told that their party opposes the legislation, they are less supportive of the policies (Tax:  $p = .078$ , Education:  $p = .078$ ).

Figures 2 and 3 break these results down by party and whether the party cue was traditional or reversed. Both proposals are Republican policies in reality. Thus, when traditional party endorsements are provided, respondents are told that Republican lawmakers proposed these policies and Democrats oppose them. As expected, Democrats are less supportive of both policy proposals when traditional endorsements are provided than when they are not (Tax:  $p = .085$ , Education:  $p = .007$ ). Furthermore, Republicans are significantly more supportive of the policies when traditional endorsements are present (Tax:  $p = .012$ , Education:  $p < .001$ ). Consistent with expectations, it appears that both Democrats and Republicans are more supportive of their party’s respective policy position when traditional party endorsements are provided. Yet, if partisan motivated reasoning is occurring, people may even be more supportive of their party’s policy position when party endorsements are reversed and completely out-of-step with reality. Here, respondents are told that Democratic lawmakers proposed these policies and Republicans oppose them. Comparing the no party cue condition with reversed party cue condition allows for an analysis of the effect of the reversed party endorsement. As hypothesized, the reversed party cues lead Democrats to be significantly more supportive of the policies (Tax:  $p = .003$ , Education:  $p = .016$ ). However, the reversed party cue has no significant effect for Republicans on either issue (Tax:  $p = .309$ , Education:  $p = .144$ ).

This pattern of results is largely consistent with H1 and partisan motivated reasoning. Partisans are more supportive of their party’s policy position when party endorsements are provided than when they are not. The exception to the overall pattern is that Republicans reveal little



**Figure 1.** Policy support by experimental condition.

Points show the linear prediction of support for each policy by condition holding other variables constant. Lines represent confidence intervals.

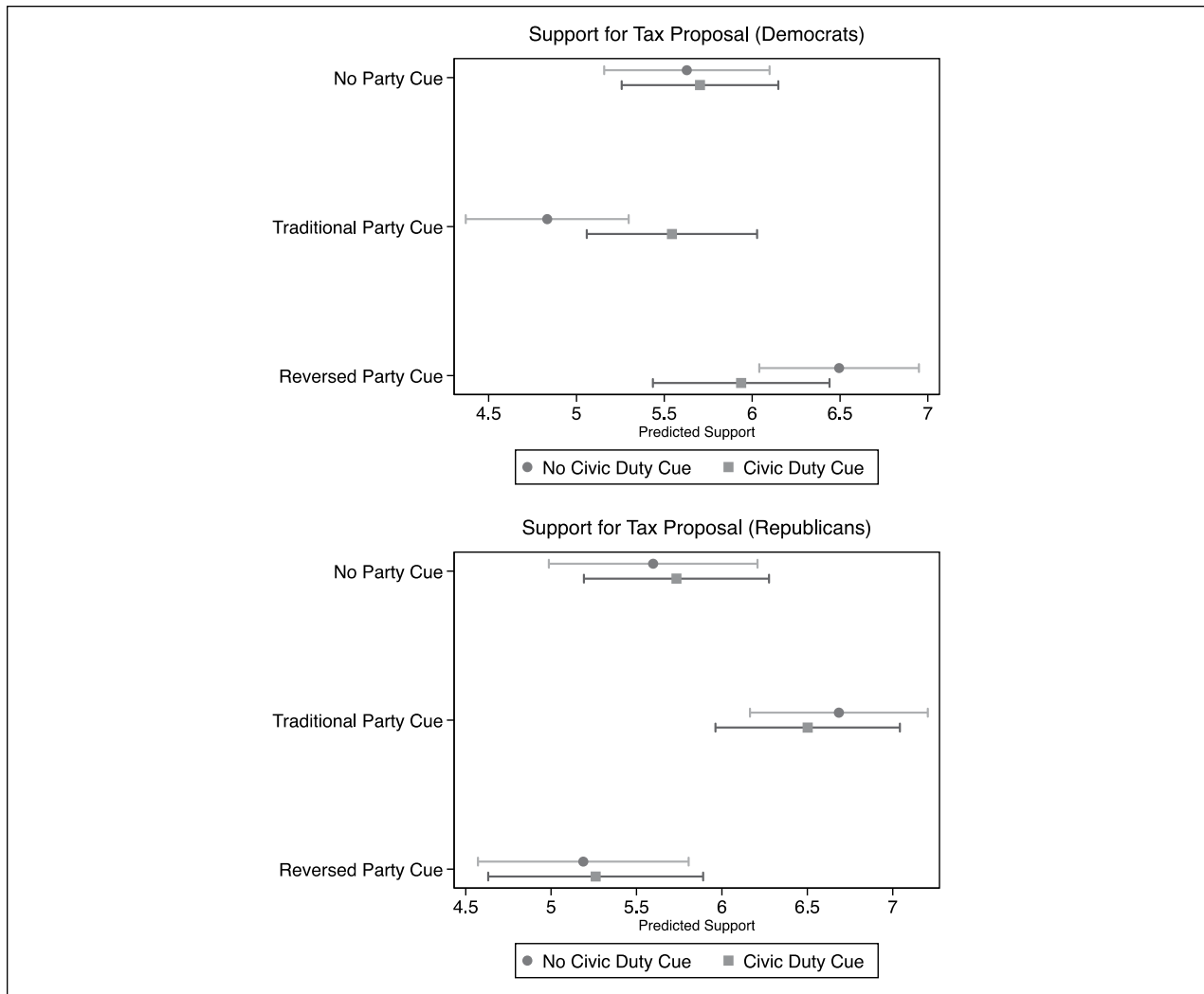
movement in response to the reversed party endorsement. Perhaps this is due to issue selection and that Republicans have entrenched attitudes on these topics. Mullinix (2016) finds that people are less responsive to reversed party cues when the issue is personally important.<sup>13</sup> If I employed less salient issues, I likely would have documented larger party endorsement effects (Ciuk and Yost 2016). Because both policies are proposed by Republicans, it is also possible that Democrats behave like “out-group” partisans, which are known to exhibit heightened motivated reasoning (Dickerson and Ondercin 2017).

### *Party Endorsements and Civic Duty*

I have yet to examine whether a heightened sense of civic duty constrains the influence of partisanship (H2). I anticipate that cuing civic duty norms will prompt people to

pay attention to substantive policy information rather than blindly follow party endorsements. If consistent with other analyses of how accuracy motivations limit partisan motivated reasoning (e.g., Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014), partisans should be less supportive of their party’s position when a party endorsement is presented with a civic duty cue than when the endorsement is presented alone.

First, I examine whether the civic duty cue diminishes support for the policy position endorsed by partisans’ preferred party. Examining Figure 1 and focusing only on conditions where respondents’ preferred party supports the policy, I compare the no civic duty cue and civic duty cue conditions. If civic duty attenuates partisan motivated reasoning, there should be less partisan support for each policy. When respondents are told that their party supports the policy and are provided the civic duty prompt,



**Figure 2.** Support for the tax proposal by party. Points show the linear prediction of support for the tax proposal by condition by party holding other variables constant. Lines represent confidence intervals.

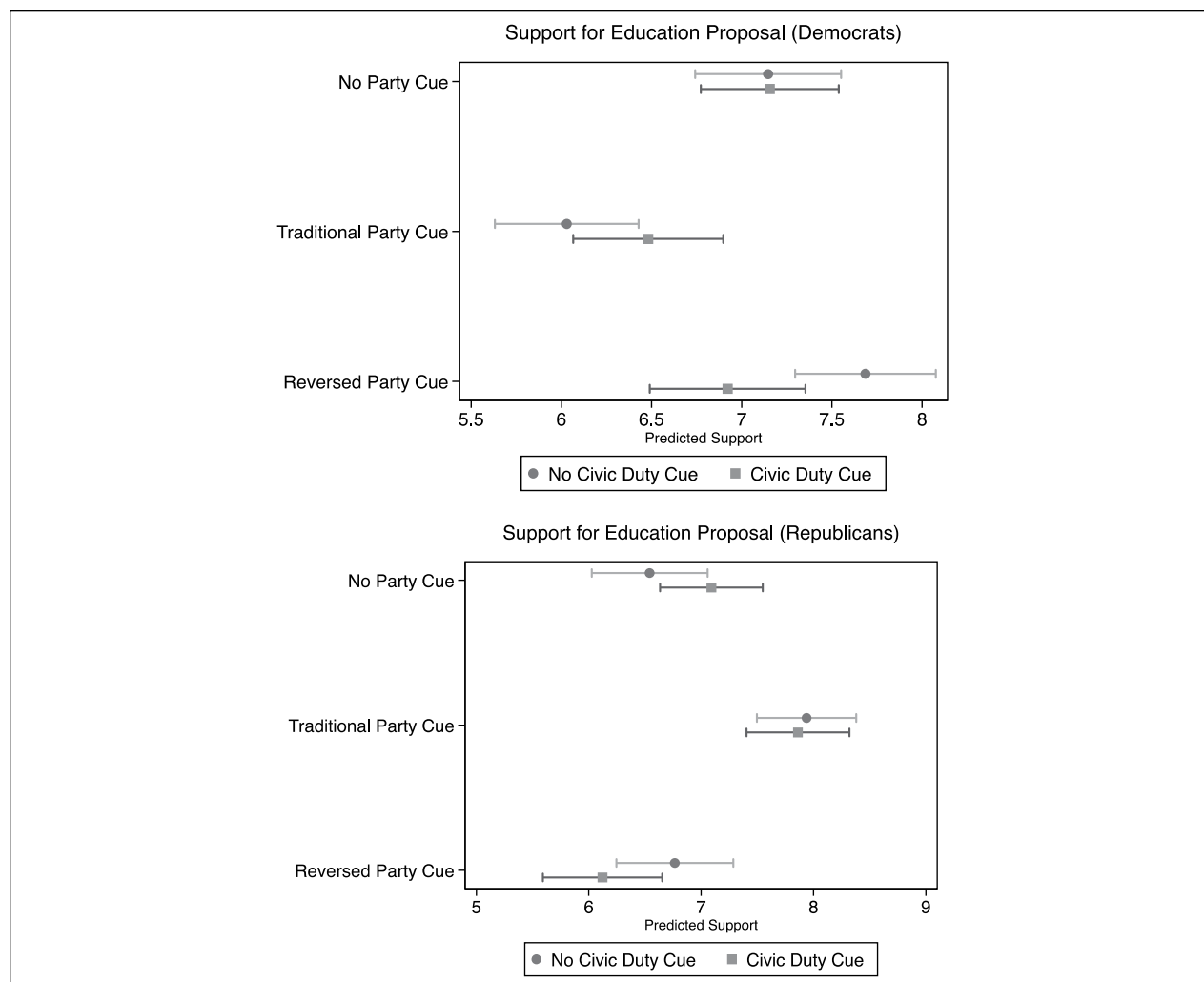
they are less supportive than when given the same party endorsement but no civic duty cue is provided, but this is only significant for the education issue (Tax:  $p = .151$ , Education:  $p = .026$ ). And when respondents are told that their party opposes the legislation, they are slightly more supportive of the tax policy when provided the civic duty cue than when not, but the cue has little effect on the education issue (Tax:  $p = .079$ , Education:  $p = .544$ ).

The results in Figure 1 (and Appendix Table A1) reveal that this diminishing of partisan policy support, in turn, has the effect of reducing the magnitude of party endorsement effects. The difference in means between no party cue and party support conditions on the tax issue is 1.102 ( $p < .001$ ) when there is no civic duty prompt. This difference is eroded to 0.585 ( $p = .028$ ) when accompanied by civic duty cues. Similarly, the difference between no party cue and party oppose conditions (absent civic duty)

is 0.472 ( $p = .078$ ), but this gap is reduced to 0.174 ( $p = .29$ ). On the education issue, the civic duty prompt mitigates the gap between no party cue and party support by over half a point. While most of these difference-in-differences are not statistically significant, they demonstrate a consistent pattern whereby the activation of civic norms cuts into the influence of party cues. Three of the four party endorsement effects illustrated in Figure 1 (no party cue vs. party supports cue and no party cue vs. party opposes cue for each issue) are eliminated when civic duty is triggered.

Yet, the results in Figure 1 mask different response patterns by Democrats and Republicans. Focusing on Democrats in Figures 2 and 3 who receive traditional party endorsements (i.e., told that Democrats oppose both policies), respondents are, as expected, more supportive of the policies when the endorsement is coupled with the





**Figure 3.** Support for the education proposal by party.

Points show the linear prediction of support for the education proposal by condition by party holding other variables constant. Lines represent confidence intervals.

civic duty cue than when the party endorsement is presented alone (Tax:  $p = .064$ , Education:  $p = .140$ ). And when Democrats are presented with the reversed party endorsement and a civic duty prompt, they are less supportive than when presented the reversed party cue alone (Tax:  $p = .110$ , Education:  $p = .006$ ). This effect is particularly pronounced on the education issue. Note that the duty cue does not always pull Democrats' attitudes in a single direction; it does not, for example, increase support across conditions. Rather, consistent with expectations, it has a moderating effect of pulling preferences back toward the average "no party cue" preference.

Interestingly, civic duty does not significantly diminish Republican support for either issue when traditional endorsements are present or on the tax issue when a reversed party cue is present. The only instance in which the civic duty prompt alters Republican support for their party's endorsed position is when respondents receive a

reversed party cue on the education issue; however, counter to expectations, Republicans become even more entrenched in their opposition to the proposal when they receive a civic duty cue ( $p = .036$ ). Thus, for Democrats, stimulating civic duty seems to function as intended; it erodes partisan support for the policies and leads people to move away from their party's policy position. Yet, for Republicans, the civic duty prompt largely has no effect at all—a point I return to in the conclusion.<sup>14</sup>

### Polarization

Motivated reasoning may amplify divisions between parties (H3a), but a heightened sense of civic duty may attenuate this polarization (H3b). The data provide some evidence of this. In the absence of party cues, there is little division between Democrats and Republicans on the tax issue (mean difference is 0.009,  $p = .492$ ). When

provided traditional cues, the gap between partisans rises to 1.711 ( $p < .001$ ), which is consistent with partisan attitude reinforcement (H3a). However, when civic duty is activated, the division between Democrats and Republicans in traditional party cue conditions is reduced to 0.929 (difference-in-differences = 0.782,  $p = .12$ ). When respondents receive reversed party cues, the civic duty cue reduces partisan polarization by 0.659 ( $p = .17$ ). Similarly, on the education issue, the distance between partisans sans party cues is 0.632 ( $p = .07$ ), and this jumps to 1.889 when traditional party cues are provided ( $p < .001$ ). But when civic norms are cued, the difference between parties in traditional cue conditions is reduced by 0.522 ( $p = .18$ ). The only instance in which the civic duty cue does not reduce partisan divisions is when people receive reversed party cues on the education issue (difference-in-differences increase by 0.078,  $p = .444$ ). The pattern of results is consistent with expectations whereby in three out of four instances, the civic duty prompt cuts the polarization between partisans by over half a point.

### Additional Analyses

If motivated reasoning is occurring, there should be evidence of systematic distortions in how people evaluate political information. To assess disconfirmation bias and counterarguing, respondents rated the effectiveness of arguments in favor and opposed to each proposal. Figure 4 shows mean evaluations of the argument in favor of the tax proposal (see Supplementary Materials for evaluations of argument opposed and education argument evaluations). The results for Democrats are consistent with expectations. Relative to the baseline no party cue condition, when provided a traditional party endorsement (i.e., Democrats oppose), Democratic respondents rate the argument in favor of the tax proposal as less effective ( $p = .044$ ), but view the argument as more effective when reversed party cues are provided ( $p = .057$ ). Yet, this shift in argument evaluations completely disappears for both traditional and reversed party endorsements when civic duty norms are made salient. Republicans, however, show no substantial or statistically significant movement in argument evaluations except in the reversed party cue and civic duty condition. Thus, it appears that Democrats filter policy arguments in a manner consistent with motivated reasoning and, more importantly, these effects are eliminated when civic norms are made salient.

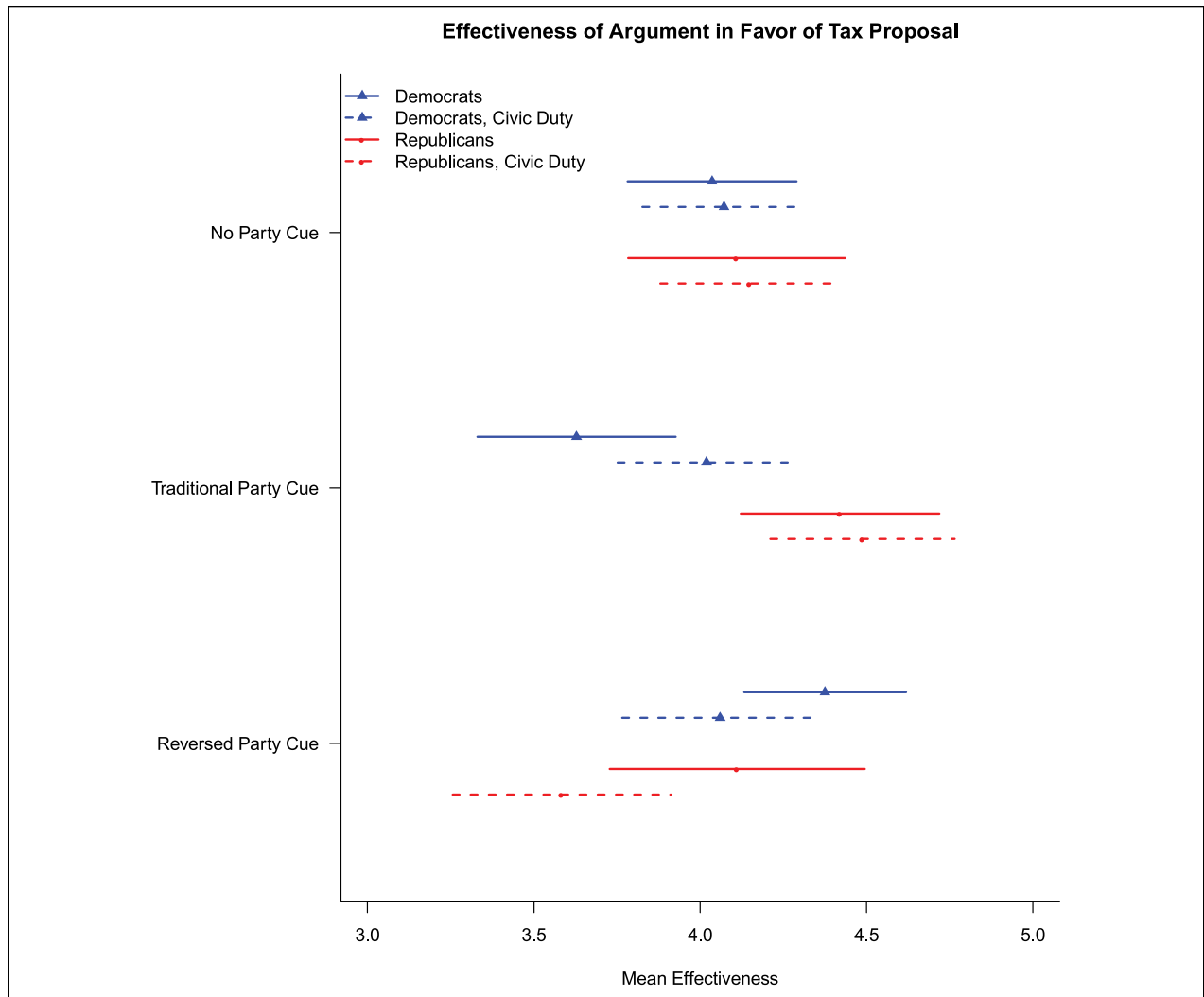
If accentuating civic norms increases accuracy motivations and mitigates partisan motivated reasoning, we might also expect partisans to be more amenable to discussing policies with people from the opposing party. For the tax proposal only, respondents were asked, "If you were to engage in a discussion of this issue, with who

**Table 1.** Percentage of Respondents Preferring to Discuss with Different Partisan Categories.

Prefer to discuss with . . .	No civic duty cue	Civic duty cue
People from same party	44.27	41.43
People from opposing party	4.77	3.85
Mix of Democrats and Republicans	41.41	48.36
Never discuss	9.54	6.36
<i>n</i>	524	519
$\chi^2(3) = 7.13, p < .068$		

would you most prefer to discuss with?" Respondents could select one of several options: Democrats, Republicans, a mix of Democrats and Republicans, or "I would never engage in a discussion." Table 1 reports the percentage of respondents that prefer to discuss the tax proposal with each option broken down by whether the respondent received a civic duty prompt. The table highlights predictable differences where partisans generally prefer to talk with people from their same party, and the civic duty cue does little to mitigate this. One notable finding is the effect of the civic duty cue on willingness to engage in a discussion with a mix of partisans. Among individuals who did not receive the civic duty cue, only 41.41 percent select the mix of partisans option, but among those who receive the prompt, 48.36 percent opted to discuss with a mix of partisans ( $p < .068$ ). When broken down by party, the effect is slightly larger for Democrats (Democrats: no cue = 38.75%, cue = 48.05%; Republicans: no cue = 45.59%, cue = 48.82%). It is worth mentioning that the civic duty cue slightly reduces the percentage of respondents who select "never discuss" from 9.54 to 6.36 percent. It appears that when civic norms are made salient, partisans become slightly more eager to discuss policies with a mix of partisans that includes people from the opposing party. These findings provide a nice parallel to Kam's (2007) demonstration that a reminder of civic duty heightens open-minded information search.

These experiments explore the effects of a stimulus designed to trigger civic duty norms. This approach provides experimental control and causal leverage on the construct of interest. An alternative approach is to explore the effects of individual-level variation in a sense of civic duty. That is, individuals who have an elevated sense of civic duty may be less responsive to party endorsements than individuals for whom civic duty is less salient. After the stimuli and dependent variables, respondents were provided with an eleven-item civic duty battery using existing measures (Dalton 2008a, 2008b; Groenendyk 2013). Consistent with previous research, I averaged across indices and consolidated them into three groups roughly equal in size: low civic duty, moderate civic duty, and high civic duty. I then analyzed policy support by



**Figure 4.** Evaluations of the argument in favor of the tax proposal.

Points show mean effectiveness rating of the argument in favor of the tax proposal by experimental condition. Lines represent confidence intervals.

experimental condition and breaking the results down by one's sense of civic duty. I restrict the analysis to the first three experimental conditions: no party cue, traditional party cue, and reversed party cue. Because the civic duty battery was provided poststimuli, the conditions that received civic duty cues would be contaminated by the stimulus. As such, to explore individual-level variation, I restrict the analysis only to individuals for whom civic duty was not manipulated.

The results are shown in the Supplementary Materials both graphically and in regression models and provide some evidence that individuals with lower levels of a sense of civic duty are more responsive to party cues—but these effects are more pronounced for Republicans. As anticipated, for both the tax and education policies, we see no significant movement for high civic duty Republicans to

either the traditional or reversed party endorsements (Tax—Traditional:  $p = .3$ , Reversed:  $p = .20$ ; Education—Traditional:  $p = .30$ , Reversed:  $p = .53$ ). In contrast, low civic duty Republicans are responsive to the traditional party cue on the education issue, shifting almost 3 points on the scale ( $p < .001$ ). And, low civic duty Republicans move about 1 point in response to the reversed cue for the tax proposal. Thus, consistent with expectations, there is some evidence of greater responsiveness to party endorsements among low civic duty Republicans than those with high civic duty. For Democrats, the results vary by issue. On the education proposal, high civic duty Democrats only respond to the traditional party cue (Traditional:  $p = .007$ , Reversed cue:  $p = .565$ ). The result that stands in contrast to expectations is that high civic duty Democrats respond to the reversed party cues on the tax proposal ( $p = .010$ ).

The results from these analyses of individual variation in civic duty potentially inform our understanding of the broader pattern of results. Republicans' policy preferences were generally less responsive to party endorsements than Democrats, and as such, there were fewer party endorsement effects for the civic duty cue to mitigate. It may be that the civic duty manipulation is less effective because individual variation in a sense of civic duty already muted the effects of party endorsements for Republicans with respect to these issues.

Previous research demonstrates that politically sophisticated individuals and people with strong attitudes are more likely to engage in motivated reasoning (Taber and Lodge 2006). To address this possibility and ensure the effects of civic duty are robust, I break results down by political interest and education (see Supporting Materials).<sup>15</sup> Political sophistication is comprised of multiple dimensions including political knowledge (Luskin 1987), and political interest and education (Luskin 1990). Research demonstrates that motivated reasoning is moderated by political interest (Mullinix 2015), and there is some evidence consistent with that here. For example, highly interested Democrats respond to the reversed party cues on education issue ( $p = .077$ ), but Democrats with low levels of interest show no such movement ( $p = .361$ ). Similarly, highly educated Democrats (four-year college degree or more) are willing to follow their party even when cues are reversed (Tax:  $p = .008$ , Education:  $p = .046$ ) while Democrats with low levels of education do not (Tax:  $p = .78$ , Education:  $p = .86$ ). The figures reveal little movement across levels of interest and education for Republicans. What is noteworthy about these analyses is that the effects of activating civic norms do not appear to be contingent on political sophistication.

In sum, triggering a sense of civic duty often mitigates the influence of party endorsements on policy preferences. Furthermore, the civic duty manipulation eliminates the influence of party endorsements on argument evaluations for Democrats, and prompts partisans to be more open to discussions with people from the opposing party. Individual-level variation in a sense of civic duty reveals that Republicans with a high sense of civic duty were nonresponsive to party endorsements. Civic duty, at times, profoundly alters the manner in which people form preferences, and attenuates the influence of partisanship.

## Conclusion

It has long been suggested that people should engage in deliberative and evenhanded evaluations of alternatives (Berelson 1952; Habermas 2006; Mill [1859] 1998), but research shows that people fall short of this standard and, instead, filter political information through a "perceptual screen" (A. Campbell et al. 1960). It would seem that partisan attachments and party elites—rather than substantive

policy information—shape preferences (Cohen 2003). That partisanship so profoundly distorts political preference formation has led scholars to discuss the implications for citizen competence (Druckman 2012; Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012). And while some have suggested that the influence of partisanship on preference formation may be constrained by accuracy motivations (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014), others have questioned the extent to which accuracy motivations exist in the real world (Taber and Lodge 2012).

I suggest that a sense of civic duty—which can be stimulated by one's environment—has the potential to trigger accuracy motivations and limit the influence of partisan motivated reasoning. Indeed, most of the significant treatment effects obtained in tests of party endorsement effects are completely erased by a few statements from an expert invoking the language of civic norms. By mitigating the degree to which people supported their party's position, the civic duty cue slightly reduced the polarization between partisans' policy preferences. The way Democrats evaluated competing arguments was considerably altered by party cues, but these effects were eliminated when civic norms were made salient. Furthermore, when a sense of civic duty was activated, people became more inclined to discuss the policy with a group that included people from the opposing party. Finally, analyses of individual-level variation in civic norms revealed that people with lower levels of a sense of civic duty were more responsive to party endorsements than people for whom civic duty was more important, but these effects were most evident for Republicans.

While many results are consistent with hypotheses, the notable exception is how Republicans in this sample responded to the civic duty manipulation. The civic duty stimulus consistently cut into partisan motivated reasoning for Democrats, but it had little effect for Republicans—and in one instance backfired (e.g., prompted Republicans to become more supportive of a reversed party cue). This may be driven, in part, by the fictitious source employed in the civic duty cue (a professor at Stanford University). I used an expert to give the source credibility. However, it may be that Republicans in this sample assume that the professor is a liberal and, as such, may not have viewed him as credible. This would help explain their lack of responsiveness to the statement made by the source as well as the backlash effect. Future research could employ different civic duty manipulations to assess source effects that tease this out.

Despite that exception, there is a pattern of evidence that a sense of civic duty can lead people to eschew party endorsements, more evenhandedly evaluate arguments from the opposing party, and incorporate policy information in decision making. These findings are consistent with a growing body of research that highlights the limitations of elite cues (Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014; Bullock 2011; Mullinix 2016)—all of which has implications for

citizen competence and the capacity of the electorate hold representatives accountable in a democratic polity (see Druckman 2012).

A sense of civic duty has often been viewed as integral to understanding political participation (Blais 2000; A. Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954; Riker and Ordeshook 1968). The current study makes clear that civic duty also serves an overlooked function; it alters preference formation. Lippmann ([1927] 2002) may have been too quick to dismiss the effects of “good straight talk about service and civic duty.” And while I trigger civic duty with a message from a policy expert, a variant of this type of message is more likely to be found in the real world than traditional accuracy motivation cues that explicitly tell respondents they will have to

justify their opinions (see Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014). Furthermore, there is evidence that more subtle reminders of civic duty change the way people seek out information (Kam 2007). I purposefully stimulated the four norms underlying a sense of civic duty to be consistent with previous research, but a fruitful avenue of inquiry would be to isolate which civic norms are most important for activating accuracy motivations and altering preference formation. It may be the case that a single norm—such as autonomy—is most effective, and/or that activating different norms may have different effects for Democrats and Republicans. Future work should not only explore different features of political information that stimulate civic norms but the prevalence of these features in campaign environments.

## Appendix

### *Civic Duty Manipulation*

We are going to ask you about a couple different issues, but first, please read what Dr. Mark Jenkins, a professor of public policy at Stanford University, recently stated:

When it comes to complex public policies, citizens have a duty to get informed. They need to openly evaluate the information from all sides and try to understand why other people have the opinions they do—independently forming opinions. Too often people just follow their party’s lead, and when they do this they cannot be sure they picked the best policy position or justify their opinion [*Autonomy*]. They should do this not only for themselves, but also because of a responsibility to make sure the government is making the best policies for the country, including those who are less fortunate [*Solidarity*]. Even though I do not directly vote on the issue, I have a say in who gets elected. That is why I always vote. Plus, you can get involved in other ways, like simply talking about issues with friends and co-workers [*Participation*]. Ultimately, we have to obey the laws that are made, so at the very least, we should be well informed about them [*Social Order*].

Bracketed text not shown to respondents but is shown here for conceptual clarity.

**Table A1.** Differences between Treatment and Control Groups.

Issue and condition	No civic duty	Civic duty
	Difference from control	Difference from control
<b>Tax issue</b>		
All respondents		
Respondent’s party supports	1.102 [0.604, 1.599]	0.585 [0.083, 1.087]
Respondent’s party opposes	−0.472 [−1.017, 0.074]	−0.174 [−0.694, 0.345]
Democrats		
Traditional party cue (Democrats oppose)	−0.589 [−1.294, 0.117]	−0.062 [−0.741, 0.617]
Reversed party cue (Democrats support)	1.092 [0.457, 1.727]	0.428 [−0.259, 1.116]
Republicans		
Traditional party cue (Republicans support)	1.114 [0.301, 1.927]	0.762 [0.026, 1.498]
Reversed party cue (Republicans oppose)	−0.262 [−1.129, 0.605]	−0.363 [−1.174, 0.449]
<b>Education issue</b>		
All respondents		
Respondent’s party supports	1.028 [0.596, 1.459]	0.321 [−0.073, 0.716]
Respondent’s party opposes	−0.439 [−0.950, 0.071]	−0.709 [−1.134, −0.284]
Democrats		
Traditional party cue (Democrats oppose)	−0.983 [−1.641, −0.325]	−0.596 [−1.150, −0.041]
Reversed party cue (Democrats support)	0.712 [0.164, 1.260]	−0.129 [−0.654, 0.396]
Republicans		
Traditional party cue (Republicans support)	1.538 [0.833, 2.243]	0.890 [0.296, 1.484]
Reversed party cue (Republicans oppose)	0.513 [−0.285, 1.311]	−0.918 [−1.583, −0.253]

90% confidence intervals are shown in parentheses. The no civic duty control refers to the no party cue, no civic duty cue condition. The civic duty control refers to the no party cue, civic duty condition.

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## Notes

1. Partisan motivated reasoning is a process related to but distinct from heuristic cue-taking (Petersen et al. 2013).
2. Also referred to as “citizen duty” (Aldrich 1993; Riker and Ordeshook 1968).
3. Schudson (1998) traces how civic norms have evolved over time.
4. See Tetlock (1983) for an extended discussion of *when* accountability is most likely to lead to complex information processing.
5. Kam (2007) focuses on learning, cognitive effort, and information search. I move beyond this to examine whether civic duty alters policy preferences, polarization, and the effects of elite partisan cues in attitude formation.
6. Groenendyk (2013, 110–11) examines people’s willingness to update their partisanship in response to information, and theorizes that “partisans update their identity because they feel it is their civic duty to conform to societal norms of pragmatism over partisanship” and the “expressive benefits that come from seeing oneself as a pragmatic citizen—an aspect of civic duty.” Groenendyk finds that people who support a civic norm of political autonomy hold party identities more reflective of their issue positions. Furthermore, he reveals that after priming civic duty, people are less likely to maintain a strong party identity and are more likely to bring their identity in line with their issue positions.
7. See also Battistoni (2013) and Jacoby (2009).
8. Full sample demographics: percent female (50.06), percent white (72.96), median age category (35–50), median education category (two-year college degree), and median income category (\$40,000–\$49,999). As a comparison, the 2010 U.S. Census data reveal percent female (51.32), percent white (66.98), and, when age is broken into the same categories, median age category (35–50). The one-year estimate of 2012 American Community Survey estimates a median income (\$51,371).
9. Respondents were asked, “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or something else?” People who selected “Democrat” or “Republican” were then asked, “Would you call yourself a strong Democrat [Republican] or not a

very strong Democrat [Republican]?” People who selected “Independent” were asked, “Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or the Democratic Party? [Republican Party, Democratic Party, or Neither].” See Supplementary Materials for power analyses.

10. Holding condition constant ensures the first issue (tax issue) is uncontaminated. Randomizing the order of issues allows for spillover effects for both issues.
11. Much has been written about the effects of message source (see Wilson and Sherrell 1993). I employ an expert source as a first test, but future work should explore different sources (e.g., partisan sources).
12. The  $p$  value results presented in-text are based on  $t$ -tests; the figures show confidence intervals based on regression models with controls. Because hypotheses are directional in nature, one-tailed  $p$  values and 90 percent confidence intervals are used except when otherwise noted. As evident, many results do not change if two-tailed tests are employed.
13. Although if Republicans were simply more familiar with these issues (see Slothuus 2016 on pretreatment effects), there should be weak effects for traditional party cues; yet, Republicans are just as responsive to traditional cues as their Democratic counterparts.
14. As anticipated, the civic duty prompt generally does not alter partisans’ policy preferences in the baseline no party cue condition.
15. Results are also shown for partisan strength. There is some evidence that strong partisans are more responsive to party cues. For example, strong Republicans shift 2.78 points in response to the traditional cue on the tax issue ( $p < .001$ ), but moderate Republicans do not move at all ( $p = .55$ ). The civic duty cue appears to function consistently across levels of partisan strength.

## Supplemental Material

Replication data for this article are available with the manuscript on the *Political Research Quarterly* (PRQ) website.

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