Scholars have found source cues—the political actors behind a policy issue—to be a potent cause of opinion change. The implication is an easily persuaded public. I advance the argument that the public is not so easily persuaded. A policy featuring group beneficiaries provides a highly informative cue, one that is likely to dominate source cues. This insight is based on research demonstrating that people ignore source cues if they engage the subject matter at hand. Using a variety of experiments, I find that group beneficiary cues often dominate source cues. However, I also find that source cues affect opinion if they provide unexpected information about (1) an endorsement that is contrary to the source’s beliefs or (2) feature an extreme, disliked outgroup.

Decades of public opinion research have shown that public attitudes on policy issues are weakly held and easily changed (e.g., Converse 1964). The implication is an easily persuaded public, one that often follows elites (Zaller 1992). Although some accounts depict the public as discriminating in its role as cue-takers—picking and choosing among sources (Lupia and McCubbins 1998)—elite influence is central to contemporary theories of opinion formation. And not without good reason: scholars have found ample support showing how different types of source cues shape policy opinion (Arceneaux 2009; Arceneaux and Kolodny 2009; Boudreau 2009; Cohen 2003; Druckman 2001; Goren, Federico and Kittilson 2009; Kam 2005; Kuklinski and Hurley 1994; Lupia 1994; Mondak 1993a, 1993b; Turner 2007).

Despite the importance of source cues, I advance the argument that they have limited effects (Druckman et al. 2010; Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2006; Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). In the study of policy attitudes, one of the most powerful predictors of opinion is whether the public likes or dislikes a group beneficiary (Converse 1964; Nelson and Kinder 1996; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). As such, a policy featuring a group beneficiary provides a highly informative cue, one that is likely to dominate a source cue.

To examine my claims, I conducted several experiments pitting source cues against policy cues, namely policy issues that help or hurt a social group. Although there are a variety of source factors that may shape attitudes, I focus primarily on source likability—whether a message recipient likes or dislikes the communicator. In the first two sets of experiments, I examine the likability of policy sponsors versus the likability of group beneficiaries in direct democracy elections. In the third experiment, borrowing heavily from Cohen (2003), I investigate the question of policy content versus policy sponsor on the issue of social welfare, a distinctly partisan issue. To preview my results, I find that policy cues dominate source cues unless a source cue provides unexpected information contrary to the source’s beliefs or features an extreme, disliked outgroup.

My findings contribute to scholarly understanding of opinion formation in several ways. Although my findings may appear to contradict a good deal of the literature on source cues, they instead underscore how source effects are contingent on the nature of the policy. If the policy in question is difficult to comprehend, as in the case of many ballot propositions, source cues will dominate policy (Bowler and Donvan 1998; Lupia 1994). On the other hand, as I find in my research, if policy is relatively straightforward (e.g., features a group beneficiary), policy cues will dominate. A major contribution of my research, then, is to show that public opinion is not easily manipulated by elites (a typical source cue) and that “real attitudes,” or something akin to them,
inform opinion on many political issues (see Kinder 2006; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 2001).

Policy and the (Group) Pictures in Our Heads

Social groups play a dominant role in shaping public attitudes toward policy issues (Campbell et al. 1960; Conover 1988; Converse 1964; Grant and Rudolph 2004; Nelson and Kinder 1996; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). In making a policy evaluation, Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock contend that, “A person is not required to be acquainted with the particular details of a specific policy to figure out whether he or she is for or against it” (1991, 22). Instead, Sniderman and colleagues propose that people use heuristics or rules of thumb. For example, in explaining public attitudes on government spending on African Americans, Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock offer that, “It suffices to know that a policy aims to help or hurt blacks: People may then support or oppose it, consistently and coherently, simply according to whether they are hostile or sympathetic to blacks” (1991, 22).

The public’s like or dislike of a social group is informed by stereotypes, what Lippmann (1922) famously characterized as “the pictures in our heads.” To make sense of “the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world,” Lippmann reasoned, “we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture” (1922, 55). Following Lippmann, scholars generally define a stereotype as an association of characteristics or traits belonging to a social group commonly held by members of a given culture (e.g., Hinton 2000). Although someone may not endorse a given stereotype, most everyone possesses knowledge of them and that knowledge is typically well organized and activated when exposed to group stimuli (Devine 1989; Greenwald and Banaji 1995).

However, as Fiske and colleagues observe, “not all stereotypes are alike” (2002, 878). Some groups are beloved whereas others are reviled. Fiske and colleagues’ stereotype content model (SCM) identifies warmth (high-low) as a primary evaluative dimension (Fiske et al. 2002). High-warmth (positively stereotyped) groups such as veterans and the elderly receive benefits or rewards whereas low-warmth (negatively stereotyped) groups such as drug addicts or criminals meet with restrictive or punishment-oriented policies. Widely shared group perceptions, in turn, inform policy opinion (Grant and Rudolph 1994; Nelson and Kinder 1996) and outcomes (Schneider and Ingram 1993). In sum, public support for many policies turns on group stereotypes. Those groups that are liked fare well while those groups that are disliked fare poorly.

Choosing Cues

Cues are pieces of information that enable people to form evaluations about an attitude object without in depth knowledge (Eagly and Chaiken 1993). Social groups with clearly defined stereotypes offer a highly informative cue about the essence of a policy. Yet, what happens if a policy cue featuring a group beneficiary is coupled with a source cue? If both the social group and the source have a positive (negative) valence, this would be unproblematic since following either cue increases the probability of support (opposition). However, if a policy targets a liked group but is sponsored by a disliked source, or vice versa, the cues contradict each other. Under this scenario, how do people decide?

Much of the literature suggests that the answer turns on source cues. Regardless of whether the source is labeled a speaker, communicator, or messenger, source factors span a variety of social science disciplines and subdisciplines. The central focus of this research concerns “how various characteristics of the communicator influence the outcomes of the communicator’s persuasive efforts” (O’Keefe 2002, 181). According to O’Keefe (2002, 181), communicator characteristics may include, but are not limited to, credibility, likability, similarity, and physical attractiveness.

Source cues have been found to move opinion on a variety of questions regardless of whether the source is an opinion leader (Druckman 2001; Kuklinski and Hurley 1994: Mondak 1993a; Mondak 1993b; Nicholson 2011), an ordinary person with incentives to be truthful (Boudreau 2009), a news organization (Turner 2007), a political party (Cohen 2003; Kam 2005; Rahn 1993), an ideological group (Brady and Sniderman 1985), or an interest group (Bowler and Donovan 1998; Lupia 1994).

The type of source factor or characteristic examined in political science typically focuses on credibility or likability. Druckman’s (2001) study of whether people are persuaded by frames communicated by a credible source (e.g., the New York Times)
or a noncredible source (e.g., the National Enquirer) exemplifies research on source credibility—the believability of a communicator. On the other hand, studies of interest group cues (e.g., Lupia 1994) exemplify research on source likability—whether the message recipient likes or dislikes the communicator.

Although there has not been a lot of research in political science looking at competing cues, a few studies have examined the relative effect of party cues and policy considerations in making evaluations of candidates (Arceneaux 2008; Rahn 1993) and policy (Cohen 2003; Malhotra and Kuo 2008). Some studies suggest that cues representing core attributes dominate peripheral cues such as party labels (Arceneaux 2008; Malhotra and Kuo 2008) but most research on source cues suggests that they dominate other considerations (e.g., Bowler and Donovan 1998; Cohen 2003; Goren, Federico, and Kittilson 2009; Kuklinski and Hurley 1994; Lupia 1994; Rahn 1993).

Perhaps nowhere is the potency of source likability more apparent than in the literature on direct democracy. To my knowledge, this literature has never found an instance in which source cues did not have an effect on voting behavior. Lupia’s (1994) seminal study of California’s 1988 auto insurance reform initiatives largely defined the scholarly approach to the study of voting in direct legislation elections and has helped shape the study of cue-taking more broadly. Lupia (1994) expected that the complexity of the choice (voting on five competing initiatives) would not prove insurmountable to voters using information shortcuts. Indeed, he found that voters who were largely ignorant of the substance of the propositions but knowledgeable about the group sponsors closely emulated the choices made by well-informed voters.

My expectation about the limitations of source cues would appear to contradict the conventional wisdom. Yet, it doesn’t. Source cues matter for difficult, complex decisions, precisely the type of decision-making task investigated by Lupia (1994). These are so-called “hard issues,” the type of issue that Carmines and Stimson (1981) identify as means-oriented, technical, and low salience. A growing body of research suggests that the effect of source cues might be most potent for this type of issue (Druckman et al. 2010; Lau and Redlawsk 2006). In contrast, Carmines and Stimson’s (1980) “easy issues” concern ends rather than means, are symbolic, and high salience. Policy imbued with the imagery of a social group fits the description of an “easy issue” and thus are likely to be resistant to source cues.

The idea that the potency of source cues varies according to the complexity or difficulty of an issue is consistent with research on persuasion and attitude change. One prominent approach to the study of attitudes proposes two types of information processing (Chaiken 1980; Petty and Cacioppo 1996), only one of which allows a significant role for source cues. Chaiken (1980), for example, posits that individuals either process information systematically or heuristically. Systematic processing is cognitively demanding, requiring deep engagement whereas heuristic processing is less effortful, relying on rules of thumb. Heuristic processing thus emphasizes secondary attributes of an attitude object such as source cues while largely ignoring message content. Since people typically have little motivation to engage complex issues, they rely on heuristics such as source cues. It is little wonder that source cues figure prominently in studies of political attitudes since many political issues are of little interest to most citizens. Complex decision-making tasks lend themselves to persuasion by source cues whereas straightforward policy issues do not. Studies in persuasion have found evidence that people ignore source cues if they engage, and presumably understand, a message (Petty, Cacioppo, and Goldman 1981).

Gigerenzer and colleagues’ “fast and frugal heuristics” offers another plausible account of how people reason about political issues when faced with multiple cues (Gigerenzer, Todd, and the ABC Research Group 1999). One heuristic proposed by Gigerenzer and colleagues, “take-the-best” (TTB), involves people taking the “best” piece of information (e.g., the most informative) and “ignoring the rest.” The important aspect of TTB is that people rank cues according to predictive accuracy, what Gigerenzer and colleagues 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.

**Overview of Experiments**

To test my expectations about the primacy of policy cues, I conducted several experiments in which participants were randomly assigned to groups in a between-subjects design. Each experiment involved varying source cues while two out of three involved

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2Petty and Cacioppo’s (1996) Elaboration Likelihood Model offers a similar conceptualization.
varying policy content. To be clear, although many experiments investigating source cues and policy emphasize issue framing (e.g., Druckman 2001), I focus instead on whether, and how, policies designed to help or harm group beneficiaries shape opinion or the vote. Thus, whereas a framing experiment involves looking at alternative depictions of an issue (e.g., Druckman 2001; Druckman et al. 2010; Jerit 2009), my experiments vary whether a policy helps or harms a group and do not contain any policy arguments (or frames). In addition, whereas many of these studies focus on source credibility, I primarily focus on source likability.  

In the first two experiments, I examine the effect of source cues through the prism of direct democracy by asking participants whether they would vote for or against a ballot measure. In so doing, I test my claim about the primacy of policy cues by examining whether support (or opposition) for a ballot measure featuring a social group is affected by the interest groups backing the ballot measure. Experiment 1 varies group sponsorship (positive versus negative) and the direction of policy (helping or harming a disliked social group), whereas Experiment 2 only varies the group sponsor (positive versus negative) while holding policy constant. The social groups I chose for these first two experiments offer what I consider to be crucial cases. The groups chosen—criminals, smokers, veterans, senior citizens, and politicians—provide unambiguous stereotypes that are, as I discuss below, clearly positive (liked) or negative (disliked).  

In Experiment 3, I extend the analysis to an explicitly partisan issue, social welfare policy. I do so not only because party cues are largely absent in direct democracy contests but also because of the centrality of party labels, a type of source cue, in many political decisions. As the dominant orientation for shaping political evaluations (Campbell et al. 1960; Cohen 2003; Rahn 1993), party cues are not easily dismissed. To extend my analysis to the partisan world, I revisit Cohen (2003) by looking at the relative effects of policy and party cues among partisans. As done in Experiment 1, I vary the source (Democrat or Republican) and policy (a generous or stringent welfare policy) to explore which one plays a greater role in shaping opinion.  

In sum, the idea was to use a variety of issues, partisan and nonpartisan, with a variety of sponsor groups, liked and disliked, to test my predictions about the relative effect of source cues and policy cues.

3Source credibility and likability, however, are highly related (O’Keefe 2002, 190).

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**Experiment 1**  
Participants were undergraduates enrolled in psychology or cognitive science classes at the University of California, Merced. 4 In the experiment, participants answered a series of questions about whether they would vote “Yes” or “No” on a ballot measure. The question wording for each ballot measure was simple and brief, modeled after the descriptive information a voter would glean from the title of a ballot measure. In addition to the items for my experiment, the survey included several psychology and cognitive science experiments (and distracter tasks) on unrelated topics. 5

Experiment 1 was run in two variants. In both, the main comparison involved varying the sponsor group (source cue) and whether a ballot measure helped or harmed a social group (policy cue). In Experiment 1a, participants were asked to vote on a ballot measure on tobacco taxes and in Experiment 1b they were asked to vote on a ballot measure on criminal sentencing. Not surprisingly, the public holds negative stereotypes of both groups. Smokers are viewed as unhealthy, weak-willed, and morally deficient (Roizen and Singh 1999). The public image of criminals is even less positive. Roberts and Stalans (1998, 37) report that the public stereotype of criminals is one of an unattractive, unemployed, gang member who is prone to violence and recidivism. Support for policies targeting these groups should be uniform given these strong, negative social images.

Both experiments follow a 2 X 2 factorial between-subjects design. For the ballot measure on tobacco taxes, the conditions include either a tax increase (harm) or decrease (help) and group sponsorship by either a public health advocacy group (positive group) or the tobacco industry (negative group). For the ballot measure on criminal sentencing, the conditions include either an increase (harm) or decrease (help) in sentence length and group sponsorship by either a criminals’ rights (negative group) or victims’ rights group (positive group). As discussed, the source cue hypothesis predicts that support will be higher for the positive (liked) sponsor

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4The surveys were distributed in October 2006. In the sample, 61% of participants were female and 39% male. The ethnic and racial makeup was 30% Asian, 28% Caucasian, 13% Hispanic, 7% Latino, 7% African American, 3% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 11% other.

5Participants received course credit and were told that the purpose of the study was to learn about research.
group relative to the negative (disliked) sponsor group. On the other hand, the policy cue hypothesis predicts that support will be higher for the policy harming a negative social group relative to the policy helping these groups.

## Experiment 1 Results

Table 1 presents the results of each experiment. Overall, support for ballot measures targeting groups for help or harm does not appear to vary by sponsor group. As seen in Table 1A, regardless of sponsor group, participants were highly supportive of the ballot measure proposing an increase in tobacco taxes—or punishing tobacco users—while much less so for the ballot proposition decreasing tobacco taxes. Indeed, regardless of whether the tax decrease on tobacco was backed by a public health group or the tobacco industry, only 17% of participants were supportive. On the other hand, the ballot measure proposing a tax increase on tobacco was enthusiastically endorsed regardless of whether it was backed by the tobacco industry or a public health group. Curiously, the tobacco industry ballot measure had slightly more support (74%) than the public health ballot measure (69%), although the difference is not statistically significant.

Table 1B presents the results for the criminal sentencing ballot measure. Consistent with the ballot measure on tobacco taxation, support for helping or harming criminals was unresponsive to sponsor group. Regardless of sponsor group, participants were highly supportive of increasing criminal sentences. Although participants were slightly more supportive of the ballot measure harming criminals sponsored by the victims’ rights group (72%) than the criminals’ rights group (65%), the difference is not statistically significant. Similarly, support for reducing criminal sentences was insensitive to sponsor group. Despite the fact that twice as many participants supported the victims’ rights ballot measure (15%) than the criminals’ rights ballot measure (7%), the difference is not statistically distinguishable from zero.

### Table 1 Support for Ballot Measures Targeting Tobacco Users and Criminals by Sponsor Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sponsor Group</th>
<th>A. Tobacco Users</th>
<th>B. Criminals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public Health</td>
<td>Victims’ Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harm</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tobacco Industry</td>
<td>Criminals’ Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harm</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Question A asked subjects whether they would vote for or against a ballot proposition on tobacco taxes. The factors are whether the ballot proposition increases (punishes) or decreases (rewards) taxes on tobacco and whether the sponsor group was a public health advocacy group or the tobacco industry. Question B asked subjects whether they would vote for or against a ballot proposition on the subject of criminal sentencing. The factors are whether the ballot proposition increases (punishes) or decreases (rewards) sentences for those convicted of violent or serious felonies and whether the sponsor group was a victims’ rights group or a criminals’ rights group.

## Experiment 2

The purpose of Experiment 2 is to provide greater breadth by examining additional issue areas and group sponsors. To this end, the same participants were asked how they would vote on several additional ballot measures. As done in Experiment 1, participants were randomly assigned to different treatment groups in a between-subjects design. In contrast to Experiment 1, however, Experiment 2 focuses exclusively on group-sponsor cues.

Experiment 2 includes three variants. Specifically, I asked participants about three ballot measures: (1) reducing property taxes on veterans; (2) making improvements to facilities for senior citizens; (3) and increasing the salaries of state legislators. The stereotypes for these groups are well worn. Not surprisingly, the public deems veterans “morally worthy” and “deserving” (Skocpol 1992), the elderly as “helpless and needy” (Huddy, Jones, and Chard 2001), and politicians as “fractious and greedy” (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, 110). Since I examined interest group sponsors that are unique to each ballot measure, I deviated from a standard factorial design. For each of the three ballot measures, different sponsor groups were included while holding constant the policy. For example, participants were asked to vote “Yes” or “No” on the following ballot measure with the condition in italics.

A ballot proposition sponsored by the political parties to increase the salaries of state legislators in accordance with annual cost of living adjustments.
In the other two treatments for this question, the sponsor was a “good government advocacy group” or “a trial lawyers group.” Given that Zaller (1992) has shown that elite consensus increases public support for an issue, we would expect the bipartisan endorsement to have a positive effect on support. On the other hand, the public views trial lawyers negatively (Grant and Rudolph 2004) so we would expect support for the initiative sponsored by this group to decline.

The idea, then, was to include a mix of favorable and unfavorable group sponsors to examine whether varying the source cue alters support. For each ballot measure, I included a mix of group sponsors. To begin, I chose group sponsors reflecting the substance of the policy: seniors backed a ballot measure to improve facilities for seniors, veterans backed a ballot measure to reduce property taxes on veterans, and the political parties backed an increase in salaries for state legislators. Although it might strike some as curious why I include both, I do so to examine those instances where the social group and sponsor group are entangled. I also chose other group sponsors, some with obvious ties to a ballot measure (a good government advocacy group behind raising the pay of legislators) and others with unexpected associations (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan sponsoring a ballot measure to help senior citizens).

Although most of the relationships between group sponsor and ballot measure are applicable to the real world (e.g., the good government group), some clearly are less so (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan). Why use an unexpected, despised group sponsor? An experiment gives researchers an opportunity to investigate counterfactuals or what might happen even if it rarely does (Mook 1983). Thus, looking at different group sponsors, even if they are unlikely sponsors, informs us about the conditions under which certain effects may happen. More to the point, including an extreme group such as the Ku Klux Klan is intended to test the limits of my theory. The other sponsors in the experiment represent mainstream groups, but using the Klan allows an examination of whether an unexpected sponsorship by a despised group alters support.

Altogether, then, I look at a variety of different sponsor groups, some expected and some unexpected, some liked, some disliked, and one, the Ku Klux Klan, deeply despised. In the control group, the baseline for the study, participants were simply given a description of a ballot measure without a sponsor group.

**Experiment 2 Results**

In Table 2, I report the percentage of participants supporting a ballot measure by sponsor group. The first column depicts support for reducing taxes on veterans while columns two and three report support for improved facilities for seniors and pay increases for legislators, respectively. The bottom row depicts support for the ballot measure absent group sponsorship. For the positively stereotyped groups, 68% and 82% of participants indicated they would vote to help veterans and seniors, respectively. On the other hand, only 27% of participants indicated support for a legislative pay raise, a negatively stereotyped group. These levels of support are similar to support for comparable ballot measures that appeared on state ballots in 2002.6

The rows above the baseline condition depict support by sponsor group. The overall pattern is that ballot measure support does not change appreciably by sponsor group. Whereas 68% of participants supported a reduction in property taxes for veterans absent a sponsor group, 58% and 66% supported it if backed by veterans and trial lawyers, respectively. Similarly, whereas 82% of participants supported improvements in facilities for seniors, 89% and 86% of participants supported the ballot measure backed by trial lawyers and seniors, respectively.

In contrast to the high support for the ballot measures helping veterans and seniors, only 27% of participants supported the ballot measure to raise legislators’ pay without a sponsor group. Yet, as with the ballot measures targeting veterans and seniors, support for raising the salaries of legislators did not change appreciably in conditions with sponsor groups. In the conditions where the ballot measure was sponsored by the political parties and trial lawyers support was only 35% and 24%, respectively.

Curiously, the ballot measure sponsored by the good government advocacy group yielded the least support with only 22% of participants indicating a yes vote.

The largest shift in support for ballot measures by sponsor group were those backed by the Ku Klux Klan. Whereas a large majority of participants were supportive of ballot measures to help veterans and seniors regardless of conventional group sponsorship only a minority were likely to support ballot

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*Arizona’s ballot measure to increase legislators’ salaries was supported by 33% of voters whereas 27% of participants expressed support. In New Mexico, a property tax exemption for disabled Veterans passed by 72% whereas among participants 68% supported it. Lastly, 82% of participants supported senior facilities whereas 55% of New Mexico residents did so.*
measures with group beneficiaries when backed by the Ku Klux Klan. The lowest level of support among the other group conditions for the ballot measure targeting veterans was 58% but in the Ku Klux Klan condition support was only 27%. Similarly, the lowest level of support among the other conditions for the ballot measure targeting seniors was 82% but in the Ku Klux Klan condition only 36% of participants indicated they would vote in favor.

To assess whether these are statistically significant differences, I estimated a series of probit models. The dependent variable is coded one (1) if participants indicated they would vote for the ballot measure and zero (0) if they would vote against it. The control or baseline group in each model received no source cues. By not including any mention of group sponsorship, the baseline condition captures unadulterated support (or opposition to) for the ballot measure.

Table 3 presents three probit models, one for each ballot measure. Each column of Table 3 depicts support for ballot measures targeting veterans, seniors, and legislators. The independent variables or group sponsors are found in each row with the baseline condition (no group sponsor) contained in the constant. Since the control group is the baseline category, analysis of group sponsor effects are made relative to the ballot measure absent group sponsorship.

The results from Table 3 confirm the impressions gleaned from Table 2. The effect of conventional group sponsorship on support across each of the ballot measures is not statistically distinguishable from zero in a two-tailed test of significance. Relative to no group sponsorship, then, there is no support for the expectation that conventional group sponsorship of a ballot measure featuring group beneficiaries affects support. However, as suggested in Table 2, sponsorship by the Ku Klux Klan significantly diminished support for a ballot measure relative to not knowing the group sponsor. For both ballot measures in which the Klan was featured as a sponsor, the tax reduction for veterans and facilities for seniors, its sponsorship had disastrous effects for the group beneficiaries. For ease of interpretation, I calculated predicted probability changes examining a change in support from no group sponsor to sponsorship by the Klan. Holding all other variables at their means, sponsorship by the Ku Klux Klan decreased the probability of voting yes on facilities for seniors by .43 and for a tax reduction for Veterans by .41.

### Table 2 Support for Ballot Measures by Sponsor Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sponsor Group</th>
<th>Social Group Receiving Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Veterans</td>
<td>Veterans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterans</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Parties</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good government</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trial Lawyers</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ku Klux Klan</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No sponsor</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3 Probit Results of the Effects of Sponsor Groups on Voting For Ballot Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sponsor Group</th>
<th>Social Group Receiving Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Veterans</td>
<td>Veterans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterans</td>
<td>-.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Parties</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good government</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trial Lawyers</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ku Klux Klan</td>
<td>-1.08*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.47*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi square</td>
<td>30.73*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psuedo R2</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05 (two-tailed test)
Dependent variable is a yes vote in favor of a ballot proposition. The baseline condition is no mention of a sponsor group. Standard errors in parentheses.

### Experiment 3

In the direct democracy experiments, I focused on social groups imbued with dominant stereotypes. In contrast, Experiment 3 extends the analysis to the world of partisan politics. Here, I examine whether, and how, party cues (a type of source cue) affect opinion on a distinctly partisan issue, social welfare policy. To examine the effect of policy cues, I also vary the direction of policy. Given that Experiment 3 concerns a partisan issue, the analysis focuses on partisan opinion, a subgroup Cohen (2003) found to be strongly influenced by party cues.
As mentioned, the experiment borrows heavily from Cohen (2003). In Cohen’s (2003) experiment (study 1), participants with strong political predispositions (conservative Republicans or liberal Democrats) were given either a generous or stringent welfare policy proposal and told that either the Democratic Party or the Republican Party endorsed it. In the pretest condition excluding party cues, Cohen (2003) found that Democrats preferred the generous policy and Republicans preferred the stringent policy. In the experiment, however, he found that party cues overwhelmed policy content. Democrats given the Democratic Party cue were supportive of the stringent policy and Republicans given the Republican Party cue were supportive of the generous policy. Although surprising, this is not an isolated finding. Rahn (1993) found much the same thing in her study of candidate appraisal by showing that partisans ignore policy substance if given a party label. Based on these findings, we would expect party cues to dominate the substance of the welfare policy proposal. In contrast, I have argued that cues representing core attributes will largely dominate peripheral attributes such as party cues. Thus, regardless of party cue, I expect Democrats to prefer the generous welfare policy and Republicans to prefer the stringent policy.

To test these predictions, I embedded experiments within an internet survey during the 2008 presidential election campaign. Using the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), I included questions about two welfare policy proposals modeled after Cohen’s (2003) experiment. Table 4 presents the two welfare proposals, one generous and one stringent. According to Cohen (2003, 810), the proposal in the left column of Table 4 is more generous than any existing welfare plan in the United States, whereas the proposal on the right is more stringent than any existing plan. As with Experiment 1, these policies either help or harm welfare recipients.

For each version of the welfare proposal, respondents were randomly assigned to one of three treatments to assess the effect of source cues: no source cue (baseline condition); a Republican supported proposal; and a Democratic supported proposal. Following Cohen (2003), party support for the proposal was included in the party cue treatments. Thus, respondents were informed of each party’s support for the proposal, with one party highly supportive and the other highly unsupportive. Directly from Cohen (2003), I included the following source cue for the Republican Party supported plan:

Imagine the following proposal supported by 95% of House Republicans and 10% of House Democrats.

For the Democratic Party proposal, I held constant the percentages in favor but switched the respective positions of the Democratic Party and Republican Party. After reading the policy proposal, respondents were asked about their support with a 4-point scale ranging from strongly oppose to strongly favor.

**Experiment 3 Results**

Following Cohen (2003), I conducted an ANOVA on participants’ welfare policy opinions. I tested three factors: (1) respondent party identification (Democrat or Republican); (2) type of welfare policy (generous versus stringent); and (3) party cues (Democrats favor, Republicans favor, or no source cue). In contrast to Cohen (2003), I include a control group (no source cue) to serve as a baseline of support to compare against the party cue treatments.

Given that the hypotheses involve the interaction between factors, I include interaction terms for each combination. As predicted, the interaction between party identification and policy had a significant effect on support \( F(1, 479) = 45.80, p < .001 \), indicating that partisan opinion depends on the type of welfare policy (generous vs. stringent). Regardless of source cue, Democrats supported the legislation if they received the generous version \( M = 2.38 \) and opposed it if they received the stringent version \( M = 1.88 \), \( t(262) = 4.01, p < .001 \). Similarly, Republicans supported the bill if they received the stringent version \( M = 2.46 \) and opposed it if they received the generous version \( M = 1.69 \), \( t(223) = 5.59, p < .001 \). In short, regardless of party backing, the substance of a policy affects what party identifiers think of it. These results stand in stark contrast to Cohen (2003).

Yet, as found in Cohen (2003), the results also suggest that party cues matter. The interaction

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7The 2008 CCES was conducted over the Internet by YouGov/Polimetrix. Respondents were selected by the method of sample matching, a methodology whereby “representative” samples are chosen from a nonrandomly selected pool of respondents. The sample is selected in two stages. In the first stage a traditional random sample is drawn. In the second stage, one or more participants who match respondents selected from the first stage are selected using a propensity matching method. The goal of the second-stage selection is to choose respondents who are as similar as possible to individuals selected from the probability sample in the first stage. For a general discussion, see Douglas Rivers, “Sample Matching: Representative Sampling From Internet Panels”: http://web.mit.edu/polisci/portl/cces/material/sample_matching.pdf.
between party identification and party cue is statistically significant \[ F(2, 479) = 17.56, p < .001 \], suggesting that party identifiers are persuaded by party cues. Regardless of whether the policy was generous or stringent, Democrats were significantly more likely to support the welfare bill when told that the Democratic Party supported it \( (M = 2.41) \) and oppose the bill when told that the Republican Party backed it \( (M = 1.84) \), \( t(180) = 3.82, p < .001 \). Likewise, Republicans were significantly more likely to express support if informed the GOP backed it \( (M = 2.44) \) and oppose it if told the Democratic Party backed it \( (M = 1.58) \), \( t(142) = 4.98, p < .001 \).

Given the evidence that both party and policy matter, it is informative to examine how each matter. In order to do so, Figure 1 depicts welfare attitudes across partisan subgroups by the type of welfare policy and party cues (also see Appendix A). Figure 1A depicts the opinion of Democrats and Figure 1B depicts the opinion of Republicans. The cluster of bars on the left-hand side represent opinion on the generous plan and the cluster of bars on the right-hand side represent opinion on the stringent plan. The bars represent each cue condition: no cue (baseline), Democratic Party cue, and Republican Party cue.

In looking at the cluster of bars in both figures that depict support for the two welfare plans it is apparent that Democrats generally support the generous plan more than the stringent plan (Figure 1A) and the opposite holds for Republicans (Figure 1B). For Democrats, Figure 1A shows that the party cues, with one exception, do not significantly affect the opinion of Democrats relative to the control group (no source cue). The exception for Democrats is the Democratic Party backing the stringent proposal. Specifically, relative to the control group, Democrats are significantly more likely to support the stringent plan if it is endorsed by Democratic legislators, \( t(83) = 2.98, p < .05 \). Democratic identifiers might be more persuaded because the Democratic Party is

### Table 4 Generous and Stringent Welfare Policy Proposals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generous Welfare Proposal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The House of Representatives has discussed many proposals to reform welfare over the years. Imagine the following proposal:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• $800 per month to a family with one child including $200 for each additional child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Full medical insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• $2000 per month in food stamps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Extra subsidies for housing and day care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Job training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 2 years of paid tuition at a community college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Eligibility limited to 8 years but a job is guaranteed afterwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Eligible for reinstatement if the family has another child</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stringent Welfare Proposal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The House of Representatives has discussed many proposals to reform welfare over the years. Imagine the following proposal:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• $250 per month to a family with one child and $50 for each additional child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Partial medical insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No food stamps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No subsidies for housing and day care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No Job training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No paid tuition at a community college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Eligibility limited to 1 1/2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No Eligibility for reinstatement if the family has another child</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![FIGURE 1 The Effect of Policy Cues and Source Cues on Welfare Policy Opinion by Party Identification](image-url)
taking a position counter to its reputation as the party of the working class (Nicholson and Segura 2012). As such, the Democratic Party might be perceived as more trustworthy or credible. Although it is not entirely clear what the mechanism is behind the effect, it is clearly unexpected for the Democratic Party to back a stringent welfare policy.

Figure 1B presents the results for Republicans. As found with Democrats, Republicans are significantly more likely to support their party’s plan if it took an unexpected position. Specifically, Republicans were more likely to support the generous welfare plan if it was backed by the Republican Party, t (81) = 3.49, p < .05. Another parallel finding between Democratic and Republican identifiers is that Republicans were not significantly more likely to support the stringent welfare reform backed by their own party (compared to the control group), a position that is consistent with the GOP’s long-standing position on the issue. Indeed, mean support among Republicans is nearly indistinguishable between the Republican Party cue (2.63) and the control group (2.64). In contrast to Democrats, the opinion of Republicans exhibited polarization (see Nicholson 2011). Specifically, when given a Democratic-backed bill, Republicans were significantly less likely to support the stringent welfare plan, t (60) = 2.85, p < .05.

In sum, rather than mindlessly following their parties, party cues persuaded partisans if parties held an unexpected position on welfare reform, perhaps giving their party the benefit of the doubt. Otherwise, other than an out-party cue polarizing Republican opinion, partisan support was largely based on policy considerations.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

If given the opportunity to express an opinion about an easily understood policy issue, with some exceptions, people do just that. In the first set of experiments on direct democracy, regardless of group sponsor (source cue), support was greater when a policy harmed a disliked social group and helped a liked group. The second set of direct democracy experiments underscored the lack of punch behind source effects. In the cases of legislative pay, veterans’ property taxes, and senior citizen facilities, it largely did not matter who backed the ballot measure. In the experiment on welfare attitudes, I found that partisan groups responded in similar fashion by supporting welfare reform programs that were consistent with their predispositions. However, source cues matter if they feature an unexpected sponsor by a despised group (the KKK) or convey unexpected information, as in the case of a political party taking an unexpected position (e.g., Democrats endorsing a stringent welfare program). Otherwise, participants largely ignored the source, opting instead to render a judgment on the basis of policy.

In Experiment 1, participants were strongly influenced by policy content. Few participants were in favor of reducing tobacco taxes regardless of whether the tobacco industry or a public health group was behind it. Similarly, support was not significantly different for the ballot measure seeking to increase tobacco taxes across sponsor groups—large majorities supported it regardless of sponsor. The same pattern was found for criminal sentencing. Participants exhibited high levels of support for ballot measures increasing sentences on criminals regardless of whether a victims’ rights or criminals’ rights group was behind it.

Yet, my results also suggest that source cues matter under particular circumstances. In Experiment 2, the Ku Klux Klan’s sponsorship significantly altered support. The effect was large and consequential. The ballot measures targeting veterans and seniors sponsored by conventional sponsor groups—both liked and disliked—or no group sponsor at all received ample majority support. In the conditions mentioning the Klan, on the other hand, support fell well below a majority. I do not interpret these results to mean that only the Klan may alter support for ballot measures featuring social group beneficiaries. Opponents of a ballot measure, for example, might effectively vilify a sponsor group behind a ballot measure. Thus, under some circumstances, a source cue may dominate a policy cue, and in the absence of that, a policy cue will likely dominate.

Although I found evidence that source cues matter in the treatment featuring the Klan as a sponsor group, other sponsor groups in my study did not significantly alter support for ballot measures. Although the Ku Klux Klan is an unconventional sponsor, the tobacco industry, political parties, trial lawyers, and good government groups, to name a few, are more typical of the types of groups involved in direct democracy campaigns. Yet, these conventional sponsors did not meaningfully alter support. In each instance, the results suggest that people made decisions on the basis of policy and ignored the source. This finding runs counter to the conventional wisdom that direct democracy voting is largely a matter of cue-taking (Bowler and Donovan 1998;
Lupia 1994). My null results for party cues in the direct democracy experiments also run counter to Zaller’s (1992) prediction that an elite consensus will increase public support. To be clear, my findings do not refute these studies but instead suggest that people are likely to ignore source cues when given easy issues.

Source cues also had limited effects in Experiment 3, the study of partisan attitudes toward welfare policy. Whereas partisan opinion moved in predictable ways according to whether the policy helped or hurt welfare recipients (e.g., Democrats preferred the generous plan), party cues had a limited effect. By including a control group as a baseline, it was possible to compare the effect of party cues relative to receiving no cues. In so doing, I found that partisans were no more likely to express support for the welfare plan if told their party backed it unless the party took an unexpected position. Since Cohen (2003) did not include a control group, he was not able to see this limited effect. Although this finding runs contrary to Cohen (2003), it supports a long tradition of research in which communicators are deemed trustworthy if they take a position contrary to the audience’s expectations (O’Keefe 2002, chap. 8).

The most surprising difference between Cohen (2003) and my findings involve the role and importance of policy content. Whereas Cohen (2003) finds that partisans abandon policy if given a party cue, I find they do not. What accounts for this discrepancy? Although there are several plausible explanations, one key difference is that Cohen’s (2003) treatment included not only party cues, but also “policy-relevant rhetoric” or issue frames. Since my focus was cue-taking, I did not examine the effect of issue frames. Yet, it might be the case that in-party cues are more influential if coupled with issue frames. Future research will have to investigate this possibility.

More remains to be done. Many of the social groups in my study had unambiguous stereotypes, intentionally so. The public, for the most part, holds uniformly positive or negative stereotypes of criminals and veterans. A promising avenue for future research would involve looking at social groups with mixed stereotypes. Immigrants, for example, are a group that can be held in high esteem (e.g., brave immigrants coming through Ellis Island) or despised (e.g., illegals crossing the border). In contrast to the groups in my study, the greater ambiguity associated with mixed-stereotyped groups might permit source cues to play a larger role. Future research, then, might explore whether the effect of source cues varies by the amount of group stereotype ambiguity.

Future research should also examine differences by political sophistication (Boudreau 2009; Kam 2005) or mode of information processing (Druckman et al. 2010). It is possible that the decision making of nonsophisticates might be less informed and perhaps more reliant on cues. Similarly, as Druckman et al. (2010) found, memory-based processors might be more influenced by cues compared to online processors.

More broadly, my results have important implications for democratic theory. On an optimistic note, my results suggest that citizens are often capable of rendering policy judgments on the merits of the policy proposal, not who is sponsoring or endorsing the policy. In this way, citizens are able to fulfill their most basic task by choosing policies regardless of elite position taking. My results also suggest that citizens will follow elites if they perceive them to act contrary to their beliefs perhaps suggesting that credibility and trustworthiness are central to elite influence.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix

Table A1 Attitudes Toward Welfare Policy by Party Identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Information</th>
<th>Party Identification</th>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Republicans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Condition</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrats favor</td>
<td>Generous policy</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stringent policy</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans favor</td>
<td>Generous policy</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stringent policy</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No source cue</td>
<td>Generous policy</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stringent policy</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Scale is from 1 (extremely opposed) to 4 (extremely in favor)
References


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