Polarizing Cues

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People categorize themselves and others, creating ingroup and outgroup distinctions. In American politics, parties constitute the in- and outgroups, and party leaders hold sway in articulating party positions. A party leader’s endorsement of a policy can be persuasive, inducing co-partisans to take the same position. In contrast, a party leader’s endorsement may polarize opinion, inducing out-party identifiers to take a contrary position. Using survey experiments from the 2008 presidential election, I examine whether in- and out-party candidate cues—John McCain and Barack Obama—affected partisan opinion. The results indicate that in-party leader cues do not persuade but that out-party leader cues polarize. This finding holds in an experiment featuring President Bush in which his endorsement did not persuade Republicans but it polarized Democrats. Lastly, I compare the effect of party leader cues to party label cues. The results suggest that politicians, not parties, function as polarizing cues.

Drawing on social identity theory, I assume that individuals interpret source cues from the perspective of ingroups and outgroups. In the American political system, one’s political identity typically means one’s partisan identity (see Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), especially in an era of partisan polarization (e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Claassen and Highton 2009; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006; Heit and Nicholson 2010; Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Jacobson 2007; Levendusky 2009). Although research on mass polarization has revealed a great deal about its nature, much remains to be learned about its microlevel causes. Abramowitz and Saunders (2008), Jacobson (2007), and Levendusky (2009) report how the opinion gap on policy issues between Democrats and Republicans has grown over time.
but we do not know whether it is caused by partisans wanting to hold the same position as their party (persuasion) or wanting to hold an opinion contrary to the other party (polarization). Is it some of both? Alternatively, which, if either, has a larger effect?

Using experiments embedded in a national survey from the 2008 presidential contest, I examine the effect of partisan source cues on partisan opinion of policy issues. Social identity theory would predict higher support for policies endorsed by the in-party leader. Yet, my analysis suggests that opinion polarization is caused solely by out-party leader cues. In my experiments, partisan leaders did not persuade in-partisans (e.g., Obama did not persuade Democrats to take his position) but instead significantly polarized the opinion of out-partisans (e.g., Obama’s support for a policy induced Republicans to hold a contrary position). In addition, I compare in-party to out-party leader cues and find that the out-party cues often have a larger effect on opinion than in-party cues. Thus, in an era of partisan polarization, opinion change may depend not so much on taking cues from one’s own party but rather from the out-party.

Lastly, I compare the effects of party labels (e.g., the Democratic Party) to party leaders (e.g., Barack Obama). The results indicate that partisans change their opinion to hold the opposite opinion of an out-party leader but that party labels, by themselves, largely do not have this effect. Based on these results, political figures, not party labels, appear to cause opinion polarization. I conclude with thoughts about the nature of cue-taking, public opinion, and opinion polarization and offer some ideas for future research.

Source Cues and Opinion Formation

The American public has, on average, minimal knowledge of, and interest in, politics (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Sniderman 1993). Not surprisingly, scholars have depicted the public as holding “nonattitudes” (Converse 1964) or at best forming opinions on the basis of “top-of-the-head” considerations that come to mind during the survey interview (Zaller 1992). Yet, having little knowledge or interest in politics does not necessarily preclude citizens from making reasoned choices. To compensate for information deficits, citizens may use information shortcuts or heuristics to make reasonably informed decisions (e.g., Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Popkin 1991; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991).

Source cues—the political actors behind an issue—are among the most widely available and influential information shortcuts in politics (Arceneaux 2008; Bowler and Donovan 1998; Druckman 2001a, 2001b; Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2006; Kam 2005; Kuklinski and Hurley 1994; Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Mondak 1993a, 1993b; Rahn 1993; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Turner 2007). The persuasiveness of a source cue typically lies in characteristics of the speaker or communicator such as credibility and trustworthiness (Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Petty and Cacioppo 1996). Although source cues can provide citizens with meaningful information about a political object, they do not always shape opinion (Druckman et al. 2010; Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2006; Kuklinski and Hurley 1994; Nicholson 2011). Studies of attitude change propose two types of information processing (Chaiken 1980; Petty and Cacioppo 1996), only one of which presumes a significant role for source cues. Chaiken (1980), for instance, posits that individuals process information systematically or heuristically. Systematic processing is cognitively demanding, requiring deep engagement of an issue, whereas heuristic processing is much less effortful, instead relying on rules of thumb. Heuristic processing thus emphasizes secondary attributes of an attitude object such as source cues while largely ignoring the content of the message.2

Given these differences in information processing, source cues have the greatest potential for shaping opinion on difficult or unfamiliar issues. Mondak (1993b) underscores this point in his study of heuristics in judicial elections by showing that source cues do not matter on questions in which citizens are highly conversant. Studies of source cues often acknowledge this distinction by purposefully choosing novel issues lacking partisan dimensions (Druckman 2001b; Kam 2005) or, as in the case of direct democracy, choosing complex policy issues that are difficult for voters to comprehend (Bowler and Donovan 1998; Lupia 1994). Regardless of whether the attitude object (dependent variable) is vote choice (Arceneaux and Kolodny 2009; Mondak 1993b) or opinion on a policy issue (Kam 2005; Mondak 1993a), research on source cues shows that well-known political actors have a powerful effect on novel or difficult choices. However, this research does not expect source cues to shape opinion on familiar questions. Nor do these studies address how source cues are used, or not used, in a partisan polarized environment.

2Petty and Cacioppo’s (1996) Elaboration Likelihood Model offers a similar conceptualization but labels the effortful processing of messages as the central route to persuasion and the reliance on secondary attributes such as source cues as the peripheral route to persuasion. Although the two approaches differ in some respects, they offer the same predictions with respect to the conditions under which cues influence opinion.
Social Identity Theory and Group Bias

Theories of intergroup relations provide a powerful lens to view opinion formation (Kinder and Kam 2009). Specifically, I focus on how partisan identification is a form of social identity (see Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). Social identity theory (SIT) (Huddy 2001; Tajfel 1982; Turner et al. 1987) and theoretical extensions (Brewer 1991, 2007) predict that in- and outgroup membership has a powerful effect on attitudes and behavior. Central to SIT is the idea that individuals categorize themselves and others who share a characteristic as ingroup members and people who do not share the characteristic as members of an outgroup. Based on even the most trivial criteria for membership (e.g., a coin toss), people exhibit strong ingroup biases. Specifically, members of groups display positive feelings toward their own group and negative feelings toward an outgroup. As originally conceived, the presumed motivation for social group categorization was the need for a positive social identity, premised on self-enhancement and self-esteem needs. Brewer’s (1991) theory of “optimal distinctiveness,” an extension of SIT, emphasizes the desire to maintain intergroup distinctiveness as a primary mechanism for social categorization. If intergroup distinctiveness is threatened, she reasons, individuals seek its restoration.

Social identity theorists have shown that ingroup biases have attitudinal consequences. When group membership was salient, people were significantly more likely to adopt the opinion of the ingroup (Mackie 1986; Mackie and Cooper 1984; Mackie, Worth, and Asuncion 1990; Turner 1991). Studies by Mackie and colleagues (Mackie 1986; Mackie and Cooper 1984; Mackie, Worth, and Asuncion 1990), for instance, demonstrated that participants were significantly more likely to be persuaded when told that an argument was made by members of their own group, whereas no such effect was evident for participants who heard the identical argument but were told that it was made by members of an outgroup. The lack of an outgroup effect in these studies, however, might be attributed to the fact that the competition among groups was either mild (Mackie and Cooper 1984) or absent (Mackie, Worth, and Asuncion 1990).3

If given a meaningful competitive nudge, however, participants in SIT research exhibit attitude polarization.

3In the experiment featuring competition “the experimenter casually noted that the two groups usually, but not always, disagreed about the issues” (Mackie and Cooper 1984, 578), and in the experiment lacking competition the outgroup was the University of New Hampshire, a nonrival to the ingroup, student subjects at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Hogg, Turner, and Davidson (1990, 84) found evidence of polarization in risk taking. Participants in the study were told that they were going to be assigned to a group with similar views in a competition for a cash prize. The task involved group members making recommendations for low- or high-risk actions. The treatment involved different versions of a tape recording depicting the outgroup as either cautious or risky. The authors found that group members confronted with an outgroup holding risky preferences polarized toward caution, whereas group members confronted with a cautious outgroup polarized toward risky behavior. The desire to differentiate oneself from an outgroup can even motivate individuals to alter self-reported personality traits (self-stereotyping) in the direction opposite an outgroup (Pickett, Bonner, and Coleman 2002). Outgroups thus appear to be a potent source of attitudes.

Partisan Identity

Party identification is clearly a type of social identity given that people easily accept categorizing themselves into groups over the most trivial of differences (remember the coin toss?). And in the political world, party identification is king. Party identification is essential to understanding how citizens make sense of the political world (Bartels 2002; Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Nicholson and Segura 2012), largely accounts for vote choice (Campbell et al. 1960; Rahn 1993), and shapes opinion on issue positions (Jacoby 1988; Kam 2005) and leaders (Jacobson 2007). Evaluations of party figures are also categorically distinct, essentially mirror opposites of each other (Heit and Nicholson 2010).

Studies of political attitudes suggest that party cues activate partisan biases on nonpartisan issues (Druckman 2001b; Kam 2005). Although this research suggests that heuristic processing is limited to nonpartisan issues, scholars have found evidence that party cues can move opinion on issues with partisan dimensions (Cohen 2003; Rahn 1993). Goren, Federico, and Kittilson (2009) even found that in-party cues shaped political values through the activation of latent partisan biases. Based on this research, I expect in-party cues to increase support for policy issues (e.g., an Obama cue will increase support among Democrats) (H1).

Studies of opinion formation in political science often neglect the role of elite (party or otherwise) cues as a source of attitude polarization. For instance, Zaller (1992, 121–22) holds that an out-party source cue has little effect by itself because partisans receiving
messages from out-party elites resist such communications either by rejecting them outright or, if accepted, countering their effects by countervalent considerations.\textsuperscript{4} Absent from Zaller (1992) is the possibility that out-party source cues polarize opinion. There is ample reason to believe that out-party cues can be a source of attitude polarization, however. Essential to whether out-party cues cause opinion polarization is the presence (or absence) of competition or disagreement. In an era of partisan polarization (e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Claassen and Highton 2009; Fiorina and Abrams 2009; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006; Heit and Nicholson 2010; Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Jacobson 2007), this condition is surely met. Although not couched in the language of polarization, there is evidence consistent with the argument that outgroup political cues may induce partisan opinion to polarize. In a study of political value expression, Goren, Federico, and Kittilson (2009) found that out-party cues moved partisans more toward their own party’s political values than in-party cues. Arceneaux and Kolodny (2009) similarly found that a pro-choice interest group’s outreach to sympathetic (pro-choice) Republican voters on behalf of a pro-choice Democratic candidate induced these Republicans to vote against, rather than for, the Democratic candidate.

The psychological mechanism behind attitude polarization may stem from the \textit{metacontrast principle}, the idea that group members seek to accentuate intergroup differences (Tajfel 1959; Turner et al. 1987). This process, according to Hogg (2005), works through prototypes. People think about groups in terms of prototypes, a set of related category attributes. Prototypes not only describe categories, but they also propose what attributes a group member ought to hold and how attitudes should differ from outgroups (Hogg 2005). Prototypes thus heighten ingroup similarities and outgroup differences. This emphasis also underlies Brewer’s (1991) theory of “optimal distinctiveness,” the idea that the primary mechanism behind social categorization is the desire of group members to maintain intergroup distinctiveness. In an environment characterized by intergroup disagreement, the desire to seek difference with the outgroup will likely be strong. Partisan politics, especially during a campaign, is such an environment. Accordingly, I expect out-party candidate cues to produce opinion polarization (e.g., an Obama cue will decrease support among Republicans) (H2).

I also expect out-party cues to have a greater effect on opinion than in-party cues (H3). The theoretical basis of this prediction flows from research demonstrating that people view their own group as holding a diversity of opinions on issues but view outgroups as holding homogenous opinions (Quattrone 1986; Quattrone and Jones 1980). Based on this research, a Republican is likely to think that (all) Democrats hold the same opinion on an issue and a Democrat is likely to believe that (all) Republicans hold the same opinions. On learning that Obama supports a policy, then, Republican identifiers who might otherwise agree with Obama’s position are more likely to take the opposite position because knowledge of Obama’s position (those Democrats are all the same) is more informative than knowledge of McCain’s position (we Republicans can disagree). In sum, the opposite party candidate’s endorsement of a policy is likely to have a greater effect on opinion than the in-party candidate’s endorsement.

Lastly, I explore the type of information processing behind source cues. Studies of source cues largely assume heuristic processing, a low-effort type of information processing in which rules of thumb (such as source cues) are used in lieu of message content. This type of information effect enables citizens to make up their minds. In contrast, systematic processing assumes people engage in effortful thought, focusing on message content. This type of information effect motivates people to change their minds.

To examine these alternative explanations, the dependent variable offers three response options: “Support,” “Oppose,” or “Not sure.” By comparing these options across the baseline condition (no cues) and the treatment condition (e.g., candidate cues), I can evaluate whether opinion change stems from people changing their minds or making up their minds. If opinion shifts from “Not sure” in the baseline condition (no cues) to “Support/Oppose” in a treatment condition (e.g., candidate cue), it would support the proposition that source cues enable people to make up their minds (H4). This type of opinion change is suggestive of heuristic processing because source cues are compensating for limited information (e.g., Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). On the other hand, if opinion shifts from “Support” in the baseline condition to “Oppose” in a treatment condition, or vice versa, it would demonstrate that source cues induce people to change their minds (H5). Shifts in opinion of this type suggest the systematic processing of source cues. This expectation is somewhat unusual in political science because cue-taking is typically associated with heuristic processing. Under some conditions, however,
TABLE 1 Question Wording for Experiments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No Cue</th>
<th>Obama Cue</th>
<th>McCain Cue</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreclosure Bill</td>
<td>A bill circulating in Congress would allow the Federal Housing Administration to guarantee up to $300 billion in new loans to help at-risk homeowners refinance into more affordable mortgages. What is your view of this bill?—Support, Oppose, Not Sure.</td>
<td>A bill circulating in Congress supported by Barack Obama would allow the Federal Housing Administration to guarantee up to $300 billion in new loans to help at-risk homeowners refinance into more affordable mortgages. What is your view of this bill?—Support, Oppose, Not Sure.</td>
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Immigration Bill

As you know, there has been a lot of talk about immigration reform policy in the news. One proposal provided legal status and a path to legal citizenship for the approximately 12 million illegal immigrants currently residing in the United States. What is your view of this immigration reform policy?—Support, Oppose, Not Sure.

5The 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 more general discussion of this methodology, see Douglas Rivers, Sample Matching: Representative Sampling from Internet Panels, http://web.mit.edu/polisci/portl/cces/material/sample_matching.pdf. The data have been weighted to reflect the demographic composition of the United States.
candidates held the same position.\textsuperscript{6} Second, I restricted my selection of issues to those with a partisan dimension in order to test the prediction in the literature that source cues have little to no effect on familiar issues, the type of issues that define everyday political discourse. Third, I wanted some breadth. To this end, I wanted an issue representative of traditional partisan economic differences and an issue from the culture wars. Housing foreclosures represent a contemporary example of the federal government helping out economically distressed citizens and immigration is a prominent issue from the culture wars (Hetherington and Weiler 2009, chap. 8). Despite other possibilities, these issues appeared to be sensible choices.

Looking at the baseline condition for each issue in Figure 1 (no cues), 56% of Democrats supported the foreclosure bill whereas only 30% of Republicans supported it. The partisan divide on immigration was even greater. Among Democrats, Figure 2 shows that 52% supported the immigration policy but only 15% of Republicans were supportive. By using familiar political issues with clear differences in partisan support, I am able to examine whether candidate and party source cues matter and if they do, under what conditions. Furthermore, using these issues provides a conservative test of my hypotheses since Democrats and Republicans appear to have already sorted themselves on these issues.

To examine the causal effects of source cues, I held constant the issue content and the position taken by the candidates (both candidates took the same position) and only varied the source cues. In a between-subjects design,
respondents were randomly assigned to a control group that received no source cue and two treatment groups: a cue that Barack Obama supported the policy and a cue that John McCain supported the policy. Later, I expand the analysis to include President Bush and party labels.

Since the focus is cue-taking from the perspective of in- or outgroups, I analyzed the data by partisan subgroups: Democratic and Republican identifiers. Thus, McCain is the ingroup cue for Republicans and the outgroup cue for Democrats while the opposite holds for Obama. In accordance with studies using similar experimental designs, I present simple comparisons of the percentage of respondents across conditions and use difference of proportions tests as tests of statistical significance. Given the directional nature of the hypotheses, I use one-tailed tests of significance unless otherwise noted.

Results

Figure 1 depicts opinion on the foreclosure bill by partisan identification for in-party and out-party leader cues. Figure 1A shows Democratic opinion on the foreclosure bill for both in-party (Obama) and out-party (McCain) leader cues and with no cue. Similarly, Figure 1B depicts opinion for Republicans but, of course, with the roles of the in-party and out-party candidates the opposite of Figure 1A. I begin by discussing the in-party comparisons. These comparisons, like the out-party comparisons, involve examining differences between conditions for a category of the dependent variable (Support, Oppose, or Not sure).

In comparing the baseline conditions to the in-party candidate cue treatment (Obama) in Figure 1A, it is apparent that there are only slight differences in Democratic opinion for each of the three categories of the dependent variable, none of which are statistically significant. In Figure 1B, the results for Republicans largely mirror those of the Democrats insofar as there are only minor differences between the baseline condition and the in-party candidate cue. Although the differences between the McCain treatment and baseline are larger than those found for Democrats and the Obama treatment, none are significantly different from zero, thus providing no evidence in support of H1.

Figure 1 also depicts out-party candidate cues. In contrast to the in-party candidate cues, however, support for and opposition to the foreclosure bill significantly differ between the treatments including candidate cues and the baseline conditions. Figure 1A presents the results for Democrats and the out-party candidate, John McCain. Opposition to the bill grows substantially among Democrats receiving the out-leader cue. Whereas in the baseline condition 11% of Democrats opposed the bill, 28% of Democrats receiving the McCain cue opposed it, a difference that is statistically significant ($z = -2.93$, $p < .05$). These results provide evidence in support of H2. The increase in opposition in the McCain cue treatment appears to stem from a reduction in the “Not sure” category, but the difference between the baseline and the McCain cue is only marginally significant ($z = 1.46$, $p = .07$).

Figure 1B presents the results for Republicans and the out-party candidate, Barack Obama. As found for Democrats, Republicans exhibit less support for, and greater opposition to, the foreclosure bill when the other party’s candidate is behind it. Opposition to the bill increases approximately nine percentage points, although this difference is not statistically significant. However, support for the bill with an Obama cue was 14 percentage points less compared to the baseline, a statistically significant difference ($z = 1.85$, $p < .05$), thus providing additional support for H2. The lack of significant differences across conditions in the “Not sure” category does not offer support in favor of H4.

Figure 2 depicts opinion on the immigration bill. As before, I begin with an examination of in-party candidate cues. In Figure 2A, there are only slight differences in support for Democrats between the no cue conditions and the Obama cue (in-party) treatments for each of the three categories of the dependent variable, none of which are statistically significant. The differences depicted in Figure 2B for Republicans and the McCain (in-party) cue are also small, with the largest difference evident in the almost six percentage point drop in support among those receiving no cue. Again, none of the differences are statistically significant and thus do not provide support for H1.

Figure 2 also depicts the results for out-party candidate cues. Figure 2A shows that Democratic support inverts across conditions; a majority supports the bill in the baseline condition (52%) and a plurality (44%) opposes it in the McCain cue (out-party) treatment. Whereas 52% of Democrats support the bill in the baseline condition, only 33% do so in the McCain cue treatment, a statistically significant difference ($z = 2.22$, $p < .05$). Despite that a majority of Republicans oppose the bill regardless of condition, Figure 2B shows that support diminishes by about 13 percentage points for the Obama cue (out-party) treatment. The difference for Republicans opposed is even greater in the Obama cue treatment. In the baseline condition, 66% of Republicans oppose the immigration bill. Republicans who received an Obama cue, however,
were even more opposed—nearly 90% opposed the bill, a 24 percentage point difference that is statistically significant ($z = -3.09, p < .05$). The Obama cue (out-party) in Figure 2B also significantly reduces the proportion of “Not sure” responses among Republicans, evidence in support of H4 ($z = 1.61, p < .05$).

Thus far, it appears that out-party cues have a significant effect on opinion whereas in-party cues do not. To evaluate whether out-party candidate cues have a significantly greater effect than in-party candidate cues (H3), it is necessary to compare the two proportions directly. Given that the baseline (no cue) is the same for each treatment, I compare the proportions for Obama and McCain within each response category of the dependent variable. In effect, the comparison is a test of the difference of the differences. In so doing, I find support for the hypothesis that out-party candidate cues have a greater effect than in-party candidate cues in three of the four manipulations. Specifically, the difference between in- and out-party (Obama and McCain, respectively) candidate cues for Democratic opposition to the foreclosure bill is over 13 percentage points, a difference that is statistically significant ($z = -2.23, p < .05$). There is also a 13 percentage point difference between in- and out-party candidates cues on the immigration bill for Democrats, although this difference is marginally significant due to the smaller N ($z = 1.55, p < .06$). Although the difference between the in- and out-party candidate cues (McCain and Obama, respectively) was not significant for Republicans on the foreclosure bill, the difference for the immigration bill is nearly 19 percentage points, a statistically significant difference ($z = -3.37, p < .05$).

The Polarizing President

To broaden the analysis, I included an additional treatment featuring President George W. Bush. In 2008, President Bush was the gold standard by which to evaluate polarizing leaders. President Bush was the most polarizing president since the advent of modern public opinion, exhibiting both the highest approval numbers among his own partisans and the lowest among the other party’s identifiers (Jacobson 2007). Scholars have also found that President Bush’s policy endorsements had a polarizing effect on policy opinion (Bartels 2008, chap. 6; Jacobson 2007). I also expect President Bush to have a polarizing effect on out-partisans (Democrats). In contrast to the previous experiment, however, the examination of a President Bush cue among Republicans provides a more stringent test of the ingroup/party hypotheses. Although McCain had won his party’s nomination, DW-NOMINATE scores show him to the left of his party and President Bush (Carroll et al. 2008), and this impression was evident in the public (Rasmussen 2008). McCain’s inability to move Republican opinion in the previous experiments thus might have been due to the perception that he was not an “authentic” Republican like President Bush.

Results

To examine the above claims, I used the same experiments as before, but instead of employing John McCain as the Republican leader, President Bush was featured. Figure 3 depicts the results by in- (Republicans) or out-party (Democrats). As found in the previous experiments, Figure 3A shows that President Bush’s backing of the foreclosure bill had a polarizing effect on out-partisans (Democrats). When President Bush was featured as endorsing the foreclosure bill, Democrats were significantly more likely to oppose it. In the absence of a source cue 11% of Democrats opposed the bill, whereas in the Bush cue treatment opposition was 24%, a 13 percentage point difference ($z = -2.14, p < .05$). Although much of the change appears to come from the Bush cue reducing the number of subjects in the “Not sure” category, the difference is not statistically significant ($z = -1.16, p = .25$).

Figure 3B shows how President Bush’s endorsement of the immigration issue polarized opinion among Democrats. The size of the effect, however, is much larger, producing an opinion reversal. In the control group (no cue), 52% of Democrats supported the immigration bill whereas in the treatment featuring President Bush, support was 28%, a statistically significant difference ($z = -2.86, p < .05$). Similarly, 33% of Democrats opposed the immigration bill when no cue was present whereas opposition climbed to 54% if President Bush endorsed the policy, a statistically significant difference ($z = 2.49, p > .05$). Recall that this pattern is also evident among Democrats in Figure 2A, the experiment on the immigration bill featuring McCain.

Figure 3C and Figure 3D depict the effects of the Bush source cues on opinion among in-party respondents (Republicans). As found with previous experiments, there are no statistically significant differences between the control (no cue) and treatment groups (Bush cue) for support or opposition for either bill. The largest difference in opinion on the immigration bill is found in Figure 3D, where support increases about 11 percentage points moving from the baseline to the Bush treatment. However, this difference is marginally significant ($z = -1.51, p = .06$).
Although there are no significant differences for support or opposition, the 13 percentage point difference in “Not sure” responses between the Bush treatment and control group is statistically significant ($z = 2.0, p < .05$). This result suggests that Bush’s imprimatur helped some Democrats make up their minds, evidence in support of H4.

I also test H3, the prediction that out-party cues have a greater effect than in-party cues. Since Obama was the Democratic Party’s standard-bearer in the 2008 election, I again use Obama for the in-party leader, but in lieu of McCain I include President Bush. As before, I compare treatments (Obama versus Bush) for a category of the dependent variable (e.g., support) to test the hypothesis that out-party leader cues have a greater effect on opinion than in-party leader cues. Among Democrats on the foreclosure bill, the difference in opposition between in-party (Obama) and out-party (Bush) cues was about nine percentage points, a difference that is marginally significant ($z = −1.51, p = .07$). None of the other results for the foreclosure bill were significantly different. On the other hand, the results for both Democrats and Republicans are statistically significant for the immigration bill. The difference between in-party (Obama) and out-party (Bush) opposition for Democrats is 22 percentage points, a difference that is statistically significant ($z = −2.58, p < .05$). The same effect size was found for Republicans. The difference between the Bush treatment (in-party) and the Obama treatment (out-party) was also 22 percentage points, a statistically significant difference ($z = 2.81, p < .05$).

What (or Who) Causes Opinion Polarization?

What, or who, causes opinion polarization? The answer, according to the above experiments, appears to be party leaders such as Barack Obama, John McCain, and George W. Bush. Next, I examine whether party labels
have a similar polarizing effect. Although the distinction between candidates and parties might appear inconsequential given the presumed close relationship between the two, research on social cognition suggests otherwise. In contrast to general or abstract cases, specific information is often more “vivid” and involving, heightening a person’s emotional involvement (Nisbett and Ross 1980, chap. 3). Sherman, Beike, and Ryall (1999, 19) offer this as an explanation for why charities that help needy children use an identified child rather than talk about the problem in larger, abstract terms. Given that individuals are typically more vivid than party labels, I expect leader cues to have a larger effect on opinion than party label cues (H6). To evaluate this claim, I provide two sets of analyses. First, I examine whether party label cues affect in- and out-party opinion in the same fashion as the party leader cue experiments. Second, I examine whether there are significant differences between party label cues and party leader cues, a direct test of H6.

Results

Figure 4 depicts the results examining the effect of party label cues on partisan opinion. Figures 4A depicts opinion on the foreclosure bill for Democrats. As before, the comparisons are between the party cue treatments and the baseline condition (no cues). Although the in-party cue (Democratic Party cue) increases Democratic support for the foreclosure bill relative to the baseline condition, the difference is not significantly different from zero ($z = -1.19, p = .12$). The out-party cue (Republican Party) decreases support for the foreclosure bill among Democrats, but this effect is not significantly different either ($z = 1.14, p = .12$). However, there is a significant difference for the decrease in the proportion of Democrats responding “Not sure” who received an in-party cue (Democratic Party) compared to the baseline condition ($z = 2.37, p < .05$), thus providing support for the notion that party cues help people make up their minds (H4). The out-party cue (Republican Party), on the other hand, increased the proportion of Democrats responding “Not sure,” although the difference is not statistically significant ($z = -1.69, p < .09$, two-tailed test).

Figure 4B depicts Republican opinion on the foreclosure bill. Curiously, Figure 4B shows that, relative to the baseline, the in-party cue (Republican Party) decreases support and increases opposition. However, neither the increase in opposition ($z = 1.71, p = .09$) nor decrease in support ($z = 1.79, p = .07$) is significant in a two-tailed test. The out-party cue (Democratic Party), on the other hand, has a significant effect increasing opposition ($z = -1.65, p = .05$) but no significant effect on support or “Not sure.” None of the party cues had an effect on the “Not sure” response category in Figure 4B.

Democratic opinion on the immigration bill is depicted in Figure 4C. Support for the bill among Democrats in Figure 4C is nearly constant across conditions. However, opposition is lower for the Democratic Party (in-party) cue, but this difference is not statistically significant ($z = 1.79, p = .08$). The Democratic Party cue also increases the proportion of Democrats choosing “Not sure,” although the effect is not significantly different from zero ($z = -1.48, p = .14$, two-tailed test). The out-party cue (Republican Party) treatment is nearly indistinguishable from the baseline condition for each of the categories of the dependent variable, and none of the differences are statistically significant.

Finally, Figure 4D depicts Republican opinion on the immigration bill. Relative to the baseline, the in-party cue (Republican Party) significantly doubles support for the immigration bill ($z = -1.92, p < .05$). Although the proportion of Republicans opposing the bill only shows a modest difference between the baseline and the in-party cue (Republican Party), the proportion of Republicans choosing “Not sure” significantly decreases with a Republican party cue ($z = 1.69, p < .05$). The out-party cue (Democratic Party) decreases support for the immigration bill by about six percentage points, but the effect is not statistically significant ($z = 1.07, p = .14$). Further, none of the other differences between the baseline and the out-party cues (Democratic Party) are statistically significant.

Table 2 presents the results of the analysis comparing party cues with candidate cues. The important quantity of interest, party difference, is reported in the last column. Party difference is simply the difference between the cues for party labels and party leaders, calculated by subtracting the latter from the former. Thus, positive values represent instances where the party cue was greater than the leader cue and negative values represent instances where the leader cue was greater than the party cue. The shaded regions of the table represent statistically significant differences. Although H6 predicts that the leader effect will be larger than the party effect, I offer a more conservative two-tailed test of significance since the conventional wisdom is that party and leader cues are interchangeable.

The top half of Table 2 presents the in-party results. Although opinion varies on both bills according to whether respondents were given a party or candidate cue, none of the differences are statistically significant. The largest difference among Democrats is found in opposition to the immigration bill. Democrats were 11 percentage points more opposed to the bill if given the Obama cue when compared to the Democratic Party cue.
FIGURE 4 Party Cues and Opinion Formation Bill

Yet, as mentioned, this difference is not statistically significant ($z = 1.32$, $p = .19$). McCain, on the other hand, was more persuasive than his party on the foreclosure bill (7%) but less so on the immigration bill (8%). Again, none of the differences are statistically significant, suggesting that in-party identifiers use candidate and party cues interchangeably.

The bottom half of Table 2 presents the results for out-party cues. In contrast to the results for in-party cues, most of the out-party leader cues polarize opinion. Among Democrats, the McCain cue produced greater opinion polarization than the Republican Party cue. On the foreclosure bill, a McCain cue (compared to the Republican Party cue) increased Democratic opposition by 20 percentage points ($z = 3.21$, $p < .05$) and decreased Democratic “Not sure” responses by 22 percentage points ($z = -2.95$, $p < .05$). On the immigration bill, Democrats also expressed significantly less support for the version featuring a McCain cue compared to a Republican Party cue, producing a significant difference of 19 percentage points ($z = -2.23$, $p < .05$). Lastly, Democrats were 12 percentage points less supportive of the bill featuring McCain compared to a Republican Party cue, but this difference is not statistically significant ($z = 1.49$, $p = .14$).

The results for Republicans reveal a similar pattern for the immigration bill but not the foreclosure bill. On the foreclosure bill the largest difference between the Obama and Democratic Party cue is found in the “Not sure” category, with Republicans expressing greater uncertainty if given an Obama cue. However, this difference is not statistically significant ($z = 1.63$, $p = .10$). On the other hand, the Obama cue is significantly more polarizing than the Democratic Party cue on the immigration issue. Republicans were 18 percentage points more opposed to the bill if it featured Obama instead of his party ($z = 2.30$, $p < .05$). In sum, Republicans were equally likely to oppose the foreclosure bill regardless of whether it was the Obama or McCain cue.
TABLE 2  Party versus Candidate Cues, 2008 Presidential Election

<table>
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<tr>
<th>In-Party Cues</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Democratic Party Identifiers</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Foreclosure Bill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Oppose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Not sure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Republican Party Identifiers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreclosure Bill</td>
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<tr>
<td>% Support</td>
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<td>% Oppose</td>
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<td><strong>Out-Party Cues</strong></td>
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*Note: Party difference is computed by subtracting the candidate cue treatment from the party cue treatment. Shaded regions p < .05 (two-tailed test).*

e endorsed by Obama or his party. In contrast, Obama was more polarizing than his party on immigration policy. Taken together, these results provide support for H6, the hypothesis that leader cues, not party cues, have a larger effect on opinion formation.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Social identity theory maintains that ingroup bias produces attitude change. According to SIT, members of groups are likely to adopt the group’s position in the desire to conform to the group’s opinion. Not doing so means violating group norms of agreement and invites cognitive dissonance. Yet, on two major issues from the 2008 presidential election, partisans did exactly that. The presidential nominees, the de facto party leaders during a presidential election campaign, did not persuade the party faithful. This pattern of results was duplicated in looking at President Bush as a source cue, one of the most polarizing political figures in recent history (Jacobson 2007). The opinion of in-partisans, or Republicans, did not significantly change either. Although I expected out-party cues to matter more, the absence of significant findings for in-party cues was something of a surprise, especially in light of research suggesting that ingroup leaders are
highly persuasive (Hogg 2001) and that ingroup biases are more potent than outgroup biases (Brewer 2007).

In contrast, my results show that out-party leaders play a more potent role in shaping partisan opinion. In comparison to the baseline (no cue), Republicans were significantly more likely to hold an opinion opposite from Obama, and Democrats were significantly more likely to hold an opinion opposite from McCain or President Bush. I also directly compared the effects of in- and out-party leader cues and found additional evidence for this effect, although not as uniformly consistent as the results comparing leader cue treatments to the baseline condition. These results suggest that partisans define themselves in relation to the out-party. Outgroup leaders thus help a person differentiate between the opinions of in- and out-group members better than the ingroup leader. Taken together, the results provide ample support for SIT's prediction that group members seek to accentuate intergroup differences (see Brewer 1991; Hogg 2005).

As with all surveys, the results of this study capture public opinion at a particular point in time. The data for this study were collected during an election campaign, a period of heightened partisanship. However, I do not expect that the results are unique to elections. Rather, I suspect the degree of polarization is likely to vary with changing political circumstances. President Obama's policy endorsements likely continue to polarize Republican identifiers. In fact, it is quite possible that the effect has grown since his taking office. On the other hand, a McCain policy endorsement has likely lost much of its polarizing punch among Democrats. President Bush's time in office is highly suggestive of a political actor's ability to polarize changes with fluctuating political circumstances. Although President Bush was a deeply polarizing figure at the beginning and end of his presidency, his endorsement of a policy might have been persuasive even among Democrats in the aftermath of 9/11 as the group lines between parties faded and were replaced, if only temporarily, by new understandings of group identity best captured by the motto “We're all New Yorkers.”

Although I cannot speak directly to the debate between those who argue about whether the mass public is fundamentally polarized, my findings suggest that opinion polarization is not easily activated among partisans. In the party cues experiment, the opinion of partisans only exhibited polarization in one instance: a Democratic Party cue (out-party) increased Republican opposition on the foreclosure bill. On the other hand, in the party leaders experiments, partisan opinion polarized in every instance by either decreasing support or increasing opposition. These results indicate that generic party cues are not polarizing (at least on policy issues), but the same cannot be said of party leaders. The implication is that partisan polarization could recede if a new era of centrist candidates emerged ( Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006) since it appears that party leaders, not party labels, motivate polarization.

The study also provides some insight into the psychological mechanism behind polarizing cues. By comparing response options, I was able to explore whether source cues motivated people to “change their minds” or enabled them to “make up their minds.” Since most of the opinion change observed happened through changing minds—altering support and opposition—the mechanism behind polarizing cues appears to be a conscious, deliberative type of attitude change consistent with systematic processing. In a few instances, source cues also reduced the proportion of “Not sure” responses, thus offering some evidence in support of the heuristic processing of source cues. However, for a variety of reasons, these findings are only suggestive of whether polarizing cues engage systematic versus heuristic processing and thus constitute a promising avenue for future research.

Future research also should explore whether, and how, issue characteristics, the type of source, and recipient attributes moderate the effects of polarizing cues. First, future research might explore different types of issues. In my experiments, source cues had a larger effect on immigration opinion than they did on foreclosure opinion. Although speculative, the difference might be attributed to the fact that immigration is a leading issue in the culture wars (Hetherington and Weiler 2009, chap. 8) or that immigration is an “easy” issue and housing foreclosures a “hard” issue (Carmines and Stimson 1980). Second, researchers might investigate how opinion varies according to perceptions of the source. Petty and Cacioppo (1996, chap. 3), for instance, identified credibility, trustworthiness, and similarity to the recipient as especially persuasive source characteristics. Lupia and McCubbins (1998) highlight the recipient’s perception of the speaker’s knowledge, incentives, and interests. Lastly, recipients might be more or less susceptible to source cues depending on how favorably or unfavorably they view the source. A partisan with mild dislike for an out-party candidate, for example, might not be affected as much as a partisan who is vehemently opposed to the out-party candidate. Heterogeneity in the recipient’s information processing (Boudreau 2009; Kam 2005; Zaller 1992) or emotional responses (Brader, Valentino, and Suhan 2008) might also facilitate or inhibit the effect of polarizing cues and thus represent additional fruitful areas of future research.

The normative implications of this study for American politics are mixed. Most studies of cue-taking focus on
whether cues contribute to, or detract from, citizen competence (e.g., Kuklinski and Hurley 1994; Lupia 1994). The results suggest that partisans are not easily manipulated by elites with whom they agree. Indeed, much of the time they ignore in-party leader opinion (see Nicholson 2011). Although this finding is consistent with the generally optimistic view in the literature that cues help inform citizens, my research also shows that partisans shift away from their party’s position solely because of an out-party leader. Polarizing cues, then, might represent a significant hurdle to governance and the building of partisan consensus.

References


