

Dividing Lines: Voter Perceptions of Intra-Party Policy Disagreement

Abstract

This paper explores the extent to which voters perceive intra-party conflict in this era of sorted and polarized parties. First, using an original experiment on two large-scale surveys, we test what, if any, policy disagreements voters perceive between hypothetical moderates and ideologues from the same party. Second, we ask voters to place recent presidential contenders on a series of issues to see whether voters perceive differences in the policy positions of high-profile candidates from the same party. Although higher knowledge respondents do seem to draw policy content from ideological labels, these labels provide little additional information beyond party identification for a large segment of the public. When asked to discern the policy positions of presidential candidates, however, even low knowledge voters recognize a degree of intra-party disagreement. These findings highlight that even in the absence of deep ideological commitment, voters are still able to recognize variation within parties over key issues of the day.

Geoffrey Sheagley
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
University of Georgia
geoff.sheagley@uga.edu

Logan Dancey
Assistant Professor
Department of Government
Wesleyan University
ldancey@wesleyan.edu

John Henderson
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
Yale University
john.henderson@yale.edu

American politics is increasingly defined by polarized and sorted political parties. On average, members of Congress vote with their party over 90% of the time (Carney 2015) while voters are increasingly sorted into parties based on ideological and social identities (Levendusky 2009; Mason 2018a). These processes have resulted in a number of consequences for the mass public: heightened reliance on partisanship when voting (Hetherington 2001), easier cue-taking (Levendusky 2010), and a greater awareness of where the parties stand on key issues (Darr and Dunaway 2017). Yet there are a number of policy cleavages within each party that exist alongside the deep divisions between the parties. Immigration reform divides congressional Republicans (Bade 2018) while their Democratic counterparts disagree about how best to reform health care (Park and Andrews 2017). More generally, intra-party disputes about ideological purity occur regularly in American politics and are central to the ways in which political parties organize around different factions of members and supporters (Noel 2014; Grossmann and Hopkins 2016).

In this paper, we explore the extent to which voters perceive intra-party conflict in this era of sorted and polarized parties. We do so in two ways. First, using an original experiment administered on two large diverse national population surveys, we test what, if any, policy disagreements voters perceive between hypothetical moderates and ideologues from the same party. Second, we ask voters to place recent presidential contenders on a series of issues to see whether voters perceive differences in the policy positions of real high-profile candidates from the same party.

Consistent with research showing that many voters are unfamiliar with the policy content of ideological labels (e.g., Converse 1964; Arian and Shamir 1982; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017), we find for a large segment of the population, that ideological labels attached to hypothetical

members of Congress do not provide any additional policy content above and beyond party identification. That said, a segment of the population makes use of these labels in ways that track intra-party divisions and generally lead to higher levels of correct knowledge. Furthermore, when asked about presidential candidates, a larger segment of the population identifies policy differences within parties. Again, these perceived differences tend to map onto real cleavages within parties.

These findings offer a mixed view of the public's ability to recognize intra-party disagreement. Many voters fall short in their ability to glean policy content from abstract ideological labels. Yet even in an era of starkly divided political parties, sizable portions of the electorate are attuned to divisions within parties and hold accurate pictures of the policy positions of key members of each party. These findings highlight that even in the absence of deep ideological commitment, voters may still be able to recognize variation within parties over key issues of the day.

Perceptions of Intra-Party Divisions

Although the media is interested in the novelty of intra-party conflict (Groeling 2010), there is reason to believe that the public has a limited ability to discern these divisions. When discussing differences within parties, party labels are held constant and voters must rely on other cues such as ideological labels like moderate, liberal, or conservative. Voters fail to reason about politics using a consistent set of ideological principles and do not structure their attitudes along ideological lines (Converse 1964; Jacoby 1991). As summarized by Kinder and Kalmoe (2017, 124), “[Americans] have no acquaintance with and little interest in liberalism and conservatism as political programs.”

Making sense of the policy implications of ideological labels may be even more difficult for voters when they are asked about intra-party instead of inter-party variation. Growing elite polarization since the mid-20th Century has led to the public having greater awareness of the association between parties, specific ideological labels, and policy positions (Levendusky 2009; Darr and Dunaway 2017). This does not mean that voters can easily recognize differences within parties, let alone identify that these differences fall along ideological lines. Spatial voting is primarily the result of party-based instead of candidate-based voting and there is little evidence that voters differentiate between same-party candidates who hold different policy positions (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2018). After finding that voters are not adept at identifying the votes of more moderate legislators, Dancey and Sheagley (2016, 867) argue, “Constituents may know that their senator is a ‘moderate’ or at least a less loyal Democrat or Republican, but constituents cannot easily translate that awareness into an understanding of their senators’ positions on specific issues.”

In sum, a long line of evidence suggests most voters have a limited ability to make meaningful policy inferences from ideological labels and to recognize intra-party differences. Leading accounts of voter reasoning imply that ideological labels should hold minimal policy content for the average citizen (e.g., Converse 1964; Achen and Bartels 2016; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). In addition, the application of ideological labels to parties and candidates may be more symbolic or affective (Arian and Shamir 1983; Ellis and Stimson 2012; Mason 2018b). Finally, voters do not typically recognize when their legislators take party atypical positions (Ansolabehere and Jones 2010; Dancey and Sheagley 2013) and most cases of spatial voting could simply be a result of voters recognizing differences between the parties as opposed to the specific candidates (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2018).

Yet there are also reasons to be more optimistic about voters' ability to detect intra-party differences in candidates' ideologies and policy positions. Individuals are to some degree attuned to variation in the ideological orientation and partisan loyalty of their legislators (e.g., Hare, Armstrong, Bakker, Carroll, and Poole 2015; Dancey and Sheagley 2017). They even use this general knowledge to make more accurate inferences about their legislators' votes on individual issues (Fortunato and Stevenson 2016).

Some voters may also be better able to identify intra-party conflicts. For example, citizens with higher levels of political knowledge and information are more likely to think about politics, candidates, and policies through an ideological lens (Jacoby 1991; Claassen, Tucker, and Smith 2015; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017; Barber and Pope 2018). Sophisticated voters are also more likely to have intense feelings towards ideological groups (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1993) and to draw on issues and ideological information when voting (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).

While this work says a great deal about how voters draw inferences *between* parties, it is largely silent on two important fronts. The first is whether voters see policy differences between leading figures or factions *within* the two parties. This is especially important because disputes over policy and ideological positioning are central features of political parties, yet they often take place between elite thinkers and policy makers and outside of the public eye (Noel 2014). Policy disagreements within parties are also central to presidential nominating contests and primary elections and law-making in Congress. The degree to which voters are aware of these divisions speaks to how clearly these disputes filter down to the mass public, and which members of the public are most attuned to these divisions.

The second question is how effectively voters can draw upon ideological information to make inferences about candidates and their positions on issues. Do labels like “liberal” or “moderate” mean something to voters such that they can deploy them to make more accurate inferences about candidates’ positions and to what degree can voters rely on ideological cues to draw inferences about where candidates stand on political issues? We address both of these questions in the following sections.

Expectations

Existing work does not provide a single perspective on whether or not voters will perceive intra-party differences nor, if they do, what form those perceptions will take. One area of research suggests that voters’ perceptions are devoid of policy content (Achen and Bartels 2016) and ideological reasoning (Converse 1964; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). This reality, combined with polarized parties (Levendusky 2009) and strong party cues (Rahn 1993; Dancey & Sheagley 2013), suggest that voters will fail to identify intra-party divisions. More formally,

Minimal Content Hypothesis: Individuals will assume that members of the same party hold similar policy views and therefore they will not perceive intra-party policy differences.

Contrasting with this expectation are a number of findings showing that voters are attuned to factors that could lead them to recognize intra-party divisions. Voters internalize whether individual legislators are less committed to their party and adjust their expectations about their positions accordingly (Fortunato and Stevenson 2016). They are also aware of variation in ideological commitment of elected officials (Hare et al. 2015), and are capable of drawing clear distinction between ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ policy positions (Henderson, Goggin, Dancey, Sheagley, and Theodoridis 2019). While not applied directly to the study of intra-party conflict,

this works suggest that voters may be equipped with information that allows them to identify these conflicts. Thus,

Party Division Hypothesis: Individuals will perceive policy differences within the political parties

Finally, it is the politically sophisticated who tend to engage in ideological reasoning (e.g., Jacoby 1991). Thus, we expect that political sophisticates will be more likely to perceive inter- and intra-party disagreements. Specifically,

Division-Sophistication Hypothesis: The politically sophisticated will see greater differences between and within the political parties compared to the unsophisticated.

Party & Ideology Cue Experiment

The first way we assess these expectations is to use an experiment to identify the degree to which individuals infer policy information from abstract ideological labels. Participants read a brief description of generic United States Senator who was described using partisan and ideological labels. Those labels were randomly varied such that the senator was described as either a liberal Democrat, a moderate Democrat, a moderate Republican, or a conservative Republican.¹ Participants were then asked how the senator would vote on nine key issues. Our design allows us to directly assess if participants perceive policy differences between Democrats and Republicans as well as between moderates and ideologues within each party.

Our first dependent variable is a respondent's perception of the hypothetical senator's position on each of nine issues. The issues we focused on are 1) building the Keystone XL

¹ The Republican cue condition also varied whether or not the senator was a supporter, an opponent, or took no position on Donald Trump. Our focus in this paper is on ideological cues so we restrict our analyses to the Republican ideological conditions that omit the mention of Trump.

pipeline, 2) repealing the Affordable Care Act, 3) expanding background checks for gun purchases, 4) banning abortions after the 20th week of pregnancy, 5) raising taxes to reduce the deficit, 6) cutting spending on domestic programs like Social Security and Medicare to reduce the deficit, 7) providing work permits to children who were brought into the country illegally, 8) approving the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and 9) cutting defense spending to reduce the deficit. We chose these issues for a combination of reasons. Some, like the TPP, immigration reform, and the ACA, were important issues that were discussed during the primary and general election seasons in 2016. Others, like cutting domestic spending to reduce the deficit, abortion restrictions, and gun control, are bedrock issues that typically divide liberals and conservatives.

Respondents were asked whether they thought the hypothetical senator would support or oppose each policy. To ease the presentation of results, we recoded these responses so that a ‘1’ corresponds to a response that the politician adopted the more conservative position on the issue and ‘0’ for the liberal position. One issue where there is arguably no clear “conservative” position is TPP, which generated intra-party disputes. We code opposition to TPP as the more “conservative” position given Trump’s vocal opposition to the TPP, although we recognize that many conservative Republicans support free trade. We complement these analyses with a second dependent variable, which is a summary measure of how many conservative positions a respondent believed the hypothetical senator held. Because of the ideological ambiguity of free trade, we omit this issue from the measure although results are substantively the same when it is included. The variable runs from 0 (no conservative positions) to 1 (all conservative positions) and has a mean of 0.58 and standard deviation of 0.30.

The experiment was administered on two different surveys. The first was a pre-election wave on a module of the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The CCES is

a large national survey consisting of a sample with over 50,000 respondents who are asked a common set of questions and modules that ask researcher-specific questions to subsets of these respondents. Our experiment was run on a module that consisted of 1,600 respondents, although only 800 respondents were exposed to the experimental treatments used in these analyses.² The module, as well as the CCES, draws on an internet panel and relies on sample matching of the survey population to the target population of all adults in the United States.³ A wide array of political science studies have been published using CCES data and the validity of this sampling method has been examined closely (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2014).

The experiment was also administered on a 2016 post-election wave of an online survey with a non-probability sample recruited by Qualtrics. The sample was diverse and matched to the general population of the United States on the dimensions of region, race, age, and gender.⁴ While not a probability sample, the distributions of the matched demographics closely mirror the

² The other 800 were in conditions that also cued whether the Republican legislator was an early supporter or opponent of Donald Trump.

³ The CCES sample frame is based on census data from the 2010 American Community Survey, turnout levels reported on the 2010 and 2008 Current Population Survey, and indicators of religiosity taken from the 2007 Pew U.S. Religious Landscape Survey (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2016).

⁴ 52% of the sample was female, with 63% White (Non-Hispanic), 17% Hispanic, 13% African American, and 5% Asian American participants. The sample was more Democratic (52%) than Republican (34%), with independent-leaners coded as partisan, leaving 13% pure independents.

population of the United States. In total, 743 participants completed the portions of the experiment utilized in this analysis.

We combined the two experiments to increase the power of our analysis, yielding a total sample size of 1,527. We also chose not to employ sample weights because our main interest is in identifying the causal effects of our treatment as opposed to generalizing to the broader population.⁵ We find consistent results when we analyze the experiments separately and when we employ sample weights. Full analyses are contained in the supporting information.

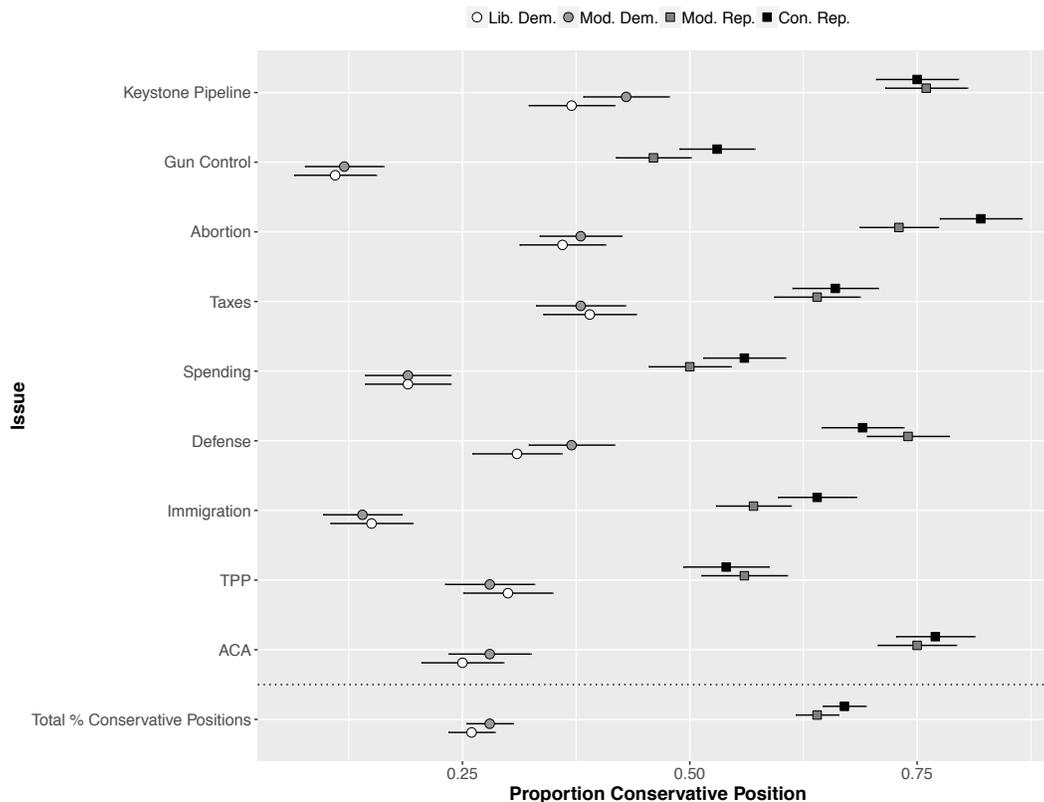
Results – Experiment

Our first analysis examines the overall effect of the treatment on perceptions of candidate positions. Figure 1 shows the proportion of respondents who perceived the candidate they evaluated as holding the conservative position on each of the 9 issues and the overall additive scale. Points correspond to the overall proportion the lines through each point are the 95% confidence interval of the estimate.

⁵ See Franco, Malhotra, Simonovits, and Zigerell (2017). Without population weights, we estimate Sample Average Treatment Effects (SATE). These may deviate slightly from population effects if the latter are heterogeneous across characteristics (e.g., political interest) that appear more frequently in our sample than in the broader target population. Miratrix, Sekhon, Theodoridis, and Campos (2018) find that in high-quality surveys, like the CCES, that “Sample Average Treatment Effect (SATE) estimates are unlikely to differ substantially from weighted estimates, and they avoid the statistical power loss that accompanies weighting” (Miratrix et al. 2018, 1).

The first clear pattern of results is that participants perceive significant inter-party differences. Averaging within each party, perceptions of a hypothetical Republican’s positions compared to a hypothetical Democrat’s positions ranged from a difference of 0.25 on the TPP to 0.50 on repealing the Affordable Care Act (ACA). That participants perceived large differences on these issues between Republicans and Democrats is not surprising given the general strength of party cues in the current era of polarized elites (e.g., Levendusky 2010).

Figure 1 – Effect of Party and Ideology Treatments on Perceptions of Candidate Positions



We also observe sizable variation in terms of perceived party differences across issues. The greatest polarization of perceptions between Democratic and Republican politicians is on repealing the ACA, though we also observe considerable polarization on support for the

Keystone Pipeline and defense spending cuts. Perceptions of party disagreement are much lower on raising taxes to reduce the deficit and the TPP. Interestingly, a little less than half of our respondents believe Senate Republicans support background checks for gun sales and that 90% believe Senate Democrats do so, making this gun rights question both parties' most 'liberal' (or possibly consensual) issue item.

Turning to intra-party variation, we see that the effects of the ideological cues are smaller than the partisan cues, although differences do emerge across some issues. Participants perceive a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$, two-sided) difference between a moderate Republican politician and a conservative Republican politician on three of the nine issues: immigration (diff=0.07, $p=0.03$), restricting abortions (diff=0.09, $p=0.004$), and background checks for gun sales (diff=0.07, $p=0.02$). The difference was also statistically significant on the overall position scale (0.04, $p=0.05$). The ideological differences are more muted for Democrats, with no differences reaching conventional levels of statistical significance.⁶

The effects of the ideological cues are substantively smaller than what we observe for the party cues – differences of 0.07 to 0.10 compared to 0.25 to 0.5. The findings are still notable for a number of reasons. First, they show that individuals see beyond party, which supports our party division hypothesis. They also show that the effect of the ideological cue treatment varies across issues. Respondents do not assume that moderates are consistently less likely to take standard Republican or Democratic position on all issues. Rather, they see certain issues as potential sources of intra-party disagreement. Among Republicans, the moderate-conservative distinction

⁶ We observe marginally significant differences on two issues: Keystone (diff=0.06, $p=0.06$) and defense spending (diff=0.06, $p=0.08$).

seems to move perceived positions on social/cultural issues, like abortion, immigration, and gun rights. We address the accuracy of these perceptions in a later section.

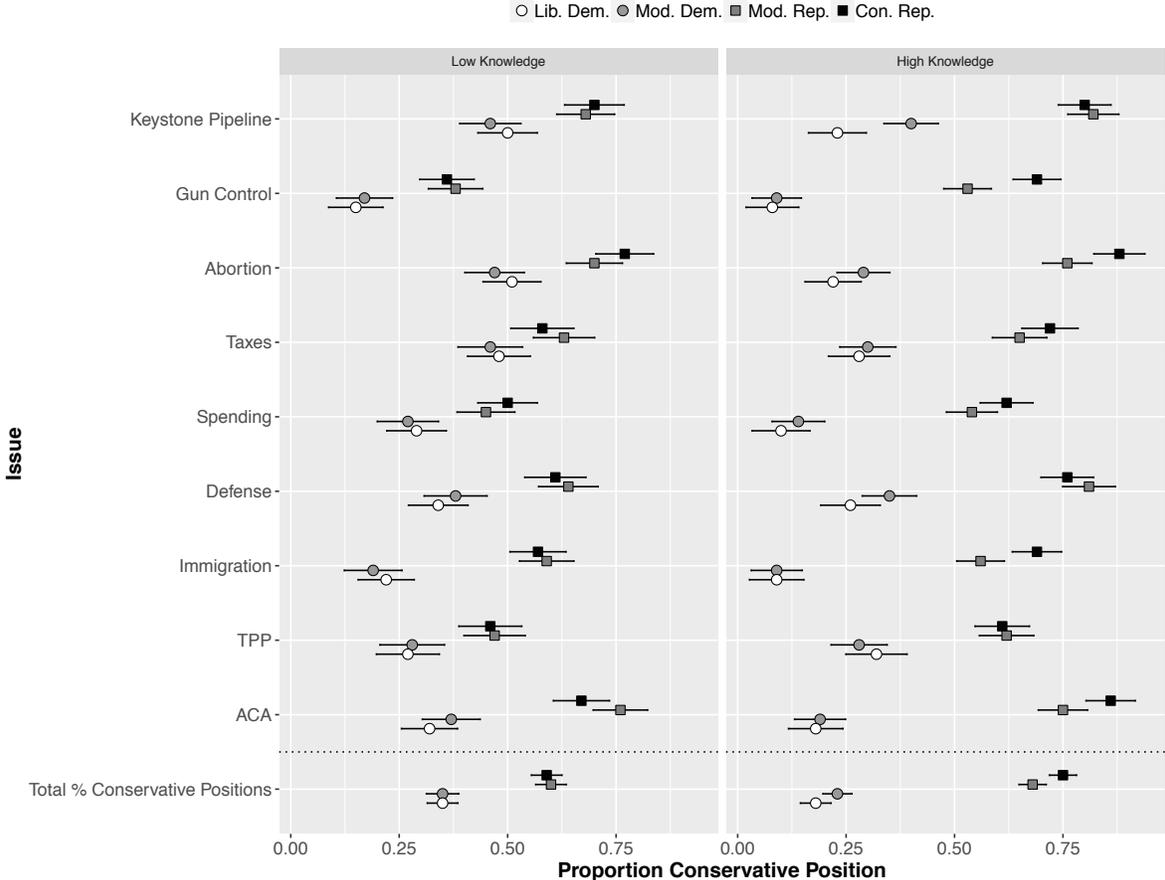
We next assess whether political sophistication moderates the use of ideological cues. Our third hypothesis is that we expect that those higher in political sophistication will be more likely to perceive intra- and inter-party divisions compared to the less sophisticated as political sophisticates tend to be more ideologically extreme and to structure their policy positions using ideological principles (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). They also perceive the congressional parties as relatively unified and cohesive (Dancey and Sheagley 2017).

We assess the impact of sophistication on the ideological cues with a measure of political knowledge constructed from two factual knowledge questions that appeared on both surveys. The knowledge questions asked respondents which political party controlled the most seats in the House and Senate, respectively. In total, 26% of respondents did not correctly answer either question, 20% knew one institution, and 54% of respondents knew both. Respondents who correctly answered both questions were treated as holding high levels of political knowledge while respondents who answered one or neither of the questions correctly were treated as having low knowledge. The result is a low threshold for being included in the high knowledge grouping, which encompasses slightly more than half the sample. While this is a coarse measure of knowledge, one virtue is that these items tap knowledge of congressional political parties, which is directly related to our analysis (Lupia 2016).

Figure 2 displays the results from the analyses that included political knowledge as a moderator of the ideology treatment. The left panel displays the effect of treatment for low knowledge respondents and the right panel shows the effect of treatment for high knowledge respondents. The lines through the point estimates are 95% confidence intervals.

The left panel reveals that the party and ideology treatments are weaker for respondents with low levels of knowledge. For example, the Democratic and Republican senator are viewed as holding similar positions on gun control, raising taxes to curb the deficit, cutting spending on Medicare, and the TPP. There are also no perceived differences between the moderate and ideological legislators' positions on any of the nine issues for either political party. In short, low sophistication voters see muted partisan difference and no ideological differences between candidates.

Figure 2 – Effect of Ideology Treatments on Perceptions of Candidate Position by Knowledge



The more knowledgeable half of respondents perceive greater inter- and intra-party differences. High knowledge respondents see the conservative Republican as more likely to hold

the conservative position than the moderate Republican on five of the nine issues. The overall scale measure also reflects this difference, with a 1/3 of a standard deviation difference (diff=0.09, p=0.001) between the moderate and conservative Republican cue conditions. While statistically significant differences between the liberal and moderate Democratic candidate only emerge on two issues (Keystone Pipeline and defense spending cuts), the overall position score is statistically different (diff=0.05, p=0.03). In short, party clearly conveys more information about candidate positions compared to ideology.⁷ However, high knowledge voters do make inferences based on ideological information.

⁷ Depending on the nature of survey response on this item, we may be understating the extent that voters perceive intra-party policy differences, while overstating perceptions of cross-party disagreements. In asking participants to assess how a moderate rather than conservative Republican would vote “on the following issues,” for instance, we might assume they envision a ‘stand-in’ for each type of Republican in office. If participants pick a stand-in to be the median moderate and median conservative Republican *for each separate issue*, we would expect to observe no intra-party differences whenever the majority of moderates agrees with the majority of conservatives issue-by-issue. We would also expect to observe complete disagreement between the parties. Alternatively, respondents may envision a stand-in to be the median Senator across issues taken together. This is closer to how we worded our question (“on the following issues”) and displayed the outcome items (arrayed on the same survey page). And this view comports more closely with our results – seeing greater differences between moderates, conservatives and liberals on issues that internally and externally divide the parties.

Correct Knowledge

A natural question that arises from the previous analyses is whether participants are making *accurate* inferences about the positions of the candidates and hypothetical legislators. The challenge of an analysis along these lines is that it requires identifying an objectively correct perception for a given issue. For the experiment, we rely on recent roll call votes in the United States Senate to identify the positions held by moderates and ideologues from each party. Four votes in the Senate during the 114th Congress (2015-16) map directly onto the issues we used in our study: Repealing the Affordable Care Act, building the Keystone Pipeline, banning abortions after the 20th week of pregnancy, and expanding background checks for gun purchases.⁸

All four votes split Republicans and Democrats in the Senate against one another, with conservative and moderate Republicans voting to repeal the Affordable Care Act, build the Keystone Pipeline, ban abortion after the 20th week of pregnancy, and against expanding background checks. Liberal and moderate Democrats took the opposite position on the ACA, abortion, and background checks votes. The Keystone Pipeline vote split Democrats in Congress, with moderates supporting and liberals opposing the pipeline.

Table 1 displays levels of correct knowledge for each issue area broken out by the four issues. There is substantial variation in knowledge within and across issues areas. The ACA, for example, reveals little difference in knowledge between or within parties while knowledge of the Keystone position shows the opposite: perceptions of Republicans are more accurate than they are of Democrats, and less than 50% of people who were asked to place a moderate Democrat on

⁸ Our supporting information provides additional details about the votes, including the breakdown of votes by party and how we coded correct knowledge.

the vote offered the correct response. That said, participants who evaluated an ideologue (conservative or liberal) always have levels of correct knowledge that are equal to or greater than those who received a moderate cue.

Table 1 – Levels of Correct Knowledge by Treatment and Issue Area

Treatment	ACA	Keystone	Abortion	Guns
Liberal Democrat	0.76 [0.71, 0.80]	0.64 [0.60, 0.69]	0.65 [0.60, 0.69]	0.89 [0.85, 0.94]
Moderate Democrat	0.73 [0.68, 0.77]	0.43 [0.38, 0.47]	0.63 [0.58, 0.68]	0.87 [0.83, 0.92]
Moderate Republican	0.75 [0.71, 0.80]	0.76 [0.71, 0.80]	0.73 [0.68, 0.78]	0.47 [0.42, 0.50]
Conservative Republican	0.78 [0.73, 0.82]	0.76 [0.71, 0.81]	0.83 [0.78, 0.87]	0.54 [0.50, 0.58]

Note – Cell entries are proportions of correct knowledge. Brackets display 95% confidence around the intervals.

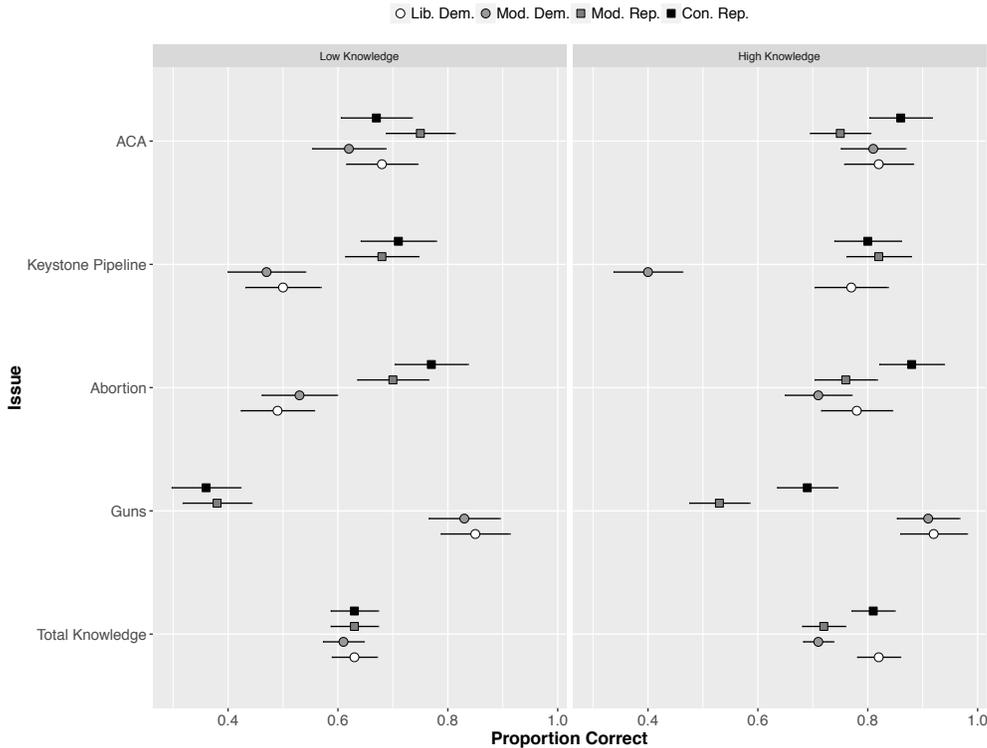
The Keystone Pipeline issue provides an interesting test case for how participants make use of the ideologue and moderate cues in a context in which a sizable faction of moderate Democrats voted with Republicans on an issue. Here we see that participants who received the moderate cue have the lowest levels of correct knowledge, with only 43% of respondents offering the correct response that a moderate Democrat voted with the Republican Party on the issue. That people assume that a Democratic senator – even a moderate one – voted with other Democrats on the issue is consistent with work showing that voters typically fail to identify when elected officials vote against their political party (Ansolabehere and Jones 2010; Dancey and Sheagley 2013).

It is also important to reinforce the earlier finding that respondents asked about a moderate Democratic senator’s position on the Keystone vote are more likely to think the senator took a conservative position than a liberal Democratic senator (diff=0.06, p=0.06). Respondents do show some awareness of actual divisions within the Democratic Party, although the party cue

serves as a powerful signal that leads the majority of respondents to assume that moderate Democrats will oppose the pipeline.

Our previous findings showing that it is the politically knowledgeable who see greater inter- and intra-party differences imply that it is these individuals who should also have higher levels of correct knowledge. To assess if this is the case, we calculated levels of correct knowledge for low and high knowledge participants. The results are displayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3 – Levels of Correct Knowledge by Treatment and Political Sophistication



High knowledge participants consistently held more accurate impressions compared to those low knowledge respondents. The exceptions are in placing moderate Republicans' positions on the ACA and moderate Democrats' positions on the Keystone Pipeline. On the Keystone vote, high knowledge respondents were six percentage points less likely to offer the

correct answer, although the difference is not statistically significant ($p=0.19$, two-tailed). The results suggest that higher knowledge respondents are not necessarily better at picking up votes that divide the parties, and, instead, their correct answers seem to be driven largely by having a better sense of where the two parties stand in the aggregate (Dancey and Sheagley 2013).

Perceptions of High-Profile Politicians

We now turn to whether and how these types of inferences map onto perceptions of real candidates' policy positions. Voters are never asked to simply pick between an unnamed moderate and an unnamed ideologue. Instead, voters are exposed to candidates who compete for votes and stake out or obscure their positions accordingly (e.g., Tomz & Van Houweling 2009; Henderson 2015; Milita, Simas, Ryan, and Krupnikov 2017). Members of the public may therefore recognize differences between candidates even if they are not fully attuned to the meaning of certain ideological labels.

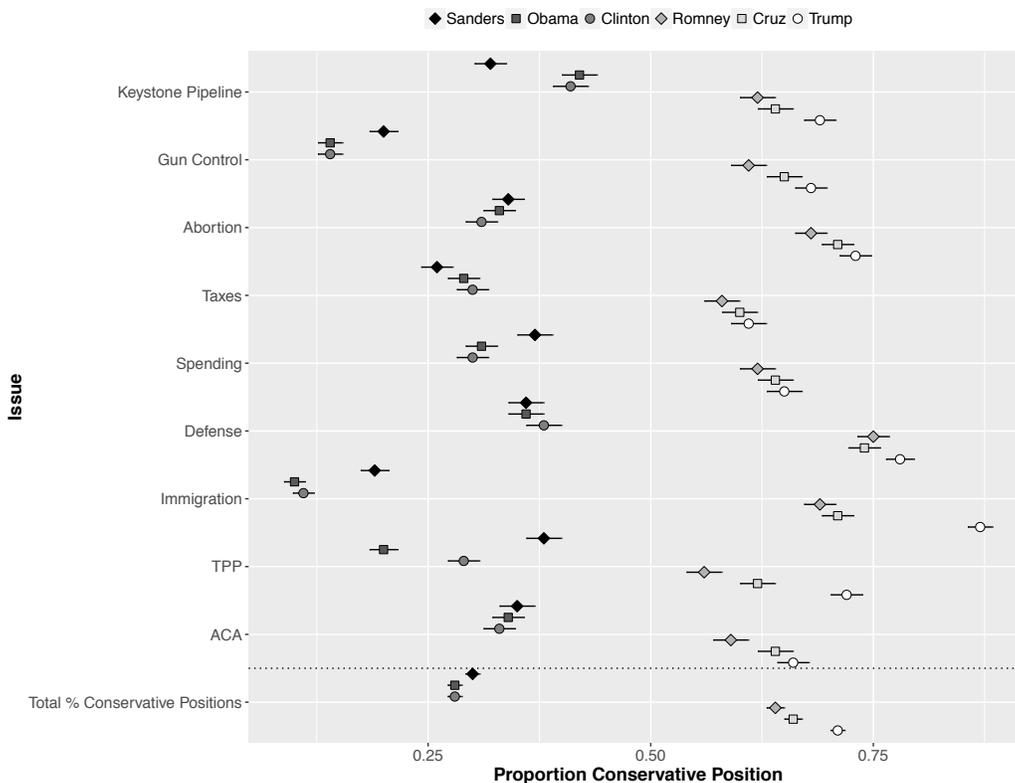
To study perceptions of politicians' policy positions, we rely on the pre-election wave of the nationally diverse survey administered by Qualtrics. This wave of the survey included 2,500 respondents and was in the field for two weeks prior to the 2016 election.⁹ We asked respondents to identify if each of six recent presidential candidates—Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, Mitt Romney, Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, and Barack Obama—would support or oppose each of the same nine issues we used for the experiment. We followed the same coding scheme as before, with a “1” corresponding to a perception that the candidate held conservative position

⁹ The results reported here are based on unweighted data to maintain consistency with the results reported in the first portion of the paper. Analyses replicated with rake weights are contained in the supporting information and are consistent with these findings.

and a “0” for a liberal position. We also created a variable that captured the proportion of conservative positions each of the candidates was perceived as holding, again omitting the TPP from the score (mean=0.53, SD=0.15).

Figure 4 shows the proportion of respondents who thought each of the six politicians would take the more conservative (or, in the case of TPP, more oppositional) stand on the issue. The results show sensible differences across parties, with the Republican candidates viewed as more conservative on all issues than the Democratic candidates. Further, there are also differences across issue domains. Democrats and Republicans are viewed as holding more alike positions on some issues, like the Keystone Pipeline and cutting spending to reduce the deficit and further apart on others, like gun control and immigration.

Figure 4 – Perceptions of Candidates’ Policy Positions



Turning first to the Republicans, we find consistent evidence that Cruz is viewed as more likely to hold conservative positions than Romney. This finding makes sense given Cruz’s status as one of the most conservative members of the United States Senate.¹⁰ For three issues — banning abortion after the 20th week of pregnancy ($p=0.14$), raising taxes to cut the deficit ($p=0.28$), and cutting spending to reduce the deficit ($p=0.35$) — there is no statistical difference between Trump and Cruz while for the other six issues Trump is viewed as more likely to take the conservative position than Cruz. The degree of differences that are statistically significant range from 0.02 on repealing the ACA to 0.15 on immigration reform. As a reference, the 0.15 difference is only 0.02 points smaller than the gap between Sanders and Romney on repealing the TPP.

Respondents’ perceptions that Trump holds consistent conservative policy positions is striking for a number of reasons. First, respondents in our survey perceived Trump to be more symbolically moderate than Cruz.¹¹ This suggests that their symbolic perceptions are distinct from policy, a finding consistent with the work on symbolic versus operational ideology in the mass public (Ellis and Stimson 2012). We also find no evidence that voters view Trump as more moderate than other Republicans due to believing that he holds a mix of traditionally liberal and conservative policy positions (Treier and Hillygus 2009). Instead, with the exception of the

¹⁰ For instance, Ted Cruz was more conservative than 94% of Republican senators in the 114th Congress according to voteview.com (Lewis et al. 2019).

¹¹ On a 7-point scale with “1” being very conservative and “7” being very liberal, respondents rated Trump at 3.2 and Cruz at 2.8, a difference of 0.4, $p < 0.001$ (two-sided).

cross-cutting TPP issue, Trump is assumed to take a traditionally conservative stand on all issues in our survey.

Respondents see little difference between Clinton and Obama on the issues, with the exception of TPP and defense spending where Clinton is viewed as more opposed to TPP and marginally less supportive of defense cuts.¹² These differences are sensible given Clinton's past support for the Iraq War and her opposition to the TPP that emerged during the 2016 campaign. On the other issues, Clinton was viewed as having the same positions as Obama.

Sanders, meanwhile, is seen as more likely to take the conservative position on some issues than either Obama or Clinton (guns, taxes, and immigration) and more likely to take the liberal position on others (Keystone pipeline, domestic spending). Thus, while Sanders was portrayed as a progressive and liberal during the election, views of his actual policy positions are more mixed. It is especially interesting that two of the issues areas where he is viewed as more conservative than Obama and Clinton – gun control and immigration policy – are two of the areas where respondents also saw the largest gaps between Democratic and Republican politicians and where Clinton criticized Sanders' record during primary debates.¹³ While Sanders' opposition to the TPP and immigration reform may not necessarily drive voters to perceive him as more conservative, it is striking that they think that he is less willing to raise taxes to curb the deficit, less supportive of background checks for gun buyers, and more supportive of restrictive immigration policy.

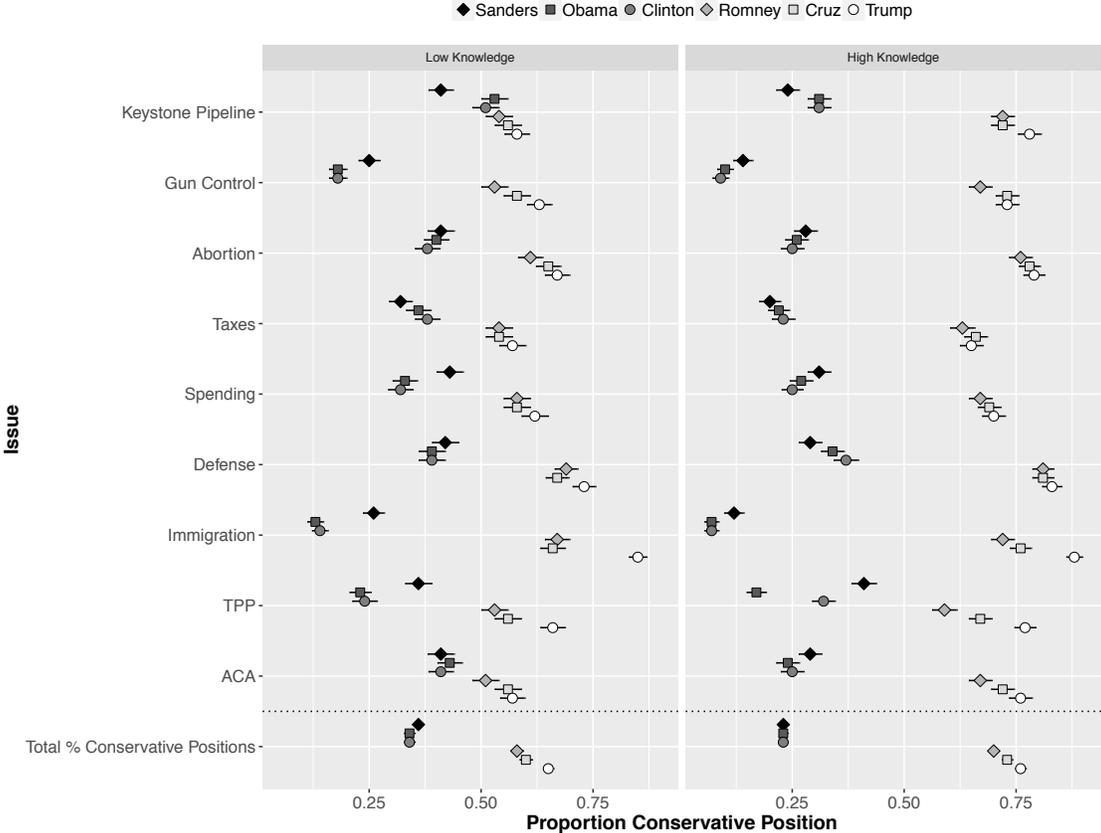
¹² TPP: Clinton-Obama=0.09, $p < 0.001$; Defense: Clinton-Obama=0.02, $p = 0.12$

¹³ On immigration, see Preston (2016). On gun control, see Rucker and Philip (2016).

Individuals do discern significant intra-party differences in many issue areas. The TPP is the most notable example of this, however there are other examples too. Respondents uniformly recognize Trump’s positions on immigration reform as well as the TPP. Sanders is consistently differentiated from Obama and Clinton, especially on the Keystone Pipeline, gun control and immigration reform. And Clinton is viewed as marginally more conservative on defense when compared to Obama.

We can also examine the impact of political sophistication on these perceptions. Figure 5 displays the proportion of respondents who perceived each candidate as holding the conservative policy position on each issue. The left panel plots the results for the lowest sophistication respondents and the right panel displays the results for those highest in sophistication.

Figure 5 – Perceptions of Candidates’ Policy Positions by Political Knowledge



Consistent with the results from our experiment, low sophistication respondents perceive far less disagreement between the parties. These differences are minimal even when examining polarized issues like abortion restrictions and repealing the Affordable Care Act. High sophistication respondents, on the other hand, see much larger policy differences between the Republican and Democratic parties.

Although perceptions of inter-party differences are more muted for low knowledge respondents, we still see evidence that these respondents perceive intra-party differences. On immigration and the TPP in particular, low-knowledge respondents view Trump and Sanders as distinct from their co-partisans. In contrast to the experimental data with ideological labels, then, perceptions of within party differences among presidential candidates seem to span both lower and higher knowledge respondents. Many respondents may not draw policy meaning from abstract ideological labels but can still recognize disagreements between leading figures within the party when they arise.

Correct Knowledge

For an additional test of voters' ability to discern intra-party divisions, we look at levels of correct knowledge of presidential candidates' positions on the TPP. The issue is unique for its cross-cutting nature, with both Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton opposing the deal during the 2016 primary despite the fact it was an Obama administration agreement. Then candidate Trump was also a vocal opponent of the deal, breaking with traditional Republican support for free trade policies. Ted Cruz also came out against the TPP during the primary.¹⁴

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of candidate positioning on the TPP: https://ballotpedia.org/2016_presidential_candidates_on_the_Trans-Pacific_Partnership_trade_deal

Since he was not a candidate in 2016, Mitt Romney’s position on the TPP was less clear, although he was a critic on Trump’s position on trade and tariffs and has since criticized the decision to oppose the TPP.¹⁵ For this issue, we coded a participant who reported that President Obama or Mitt Romney supported the TPP as having a correct opinion. Perceptions of the remaining candidates was coded as correct if participants identified their positions as opposing the measure. Table 2 shows the overall level of correct knowledge for each candidate as well as how those levels vary by political knowledge.

Table 2 – Levels of Correct Knowledge on TPP by Candidate and Political Sophistication

Candidate	Overall	Low Knowledge	High Knowledge
Obama	0.80 [0.78, 0.81]	0.77 [0.75, 0.80]	0.83 [0.81, 0.85]
Trump	0.72 [0.70, 0.74]	0.66 [0.63, 0.69]	0.77 [0.75, 0.80]
Cruz	0.62 [0.60, 0.64]	0.56 [0.53, 0.59]	0.67 [0.65, 0.70]
Romney	0.44 [0.42, 0.46]	0.47 [0.44, 0.50]	0.41 [0.38, 0.44]
Sanders	0.38 [0.37, 0.40]	0.36 [0.33, 0.39]	0.41 [0.38, 0.44]
Clinton	0.29 [0.27, 0.30]	0.24 [0.21, 0.27]	0.32 [0.29, 0.35]

Notes – The difference between low and high knowledge respondents is significant at $p < 0.05$ for each candidate. Numbers in brackets are 95% confidence intervals.

Table 2 shows that respondents had the clearest sense of where Obama and Trump stood on the TPP, with sizeable majorities of both high and low knowledge respondents able to correctly place Obama as a supporter of the TPP and Trump as an opponent. Perhaps as a result of knowing where Obama and Trump stood, respondents largely assumed that Democratic

¹⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/04/us/politics/mitt-romney-speech.html>

candidates supported the deal and Republicans opposed it. A majority correctly assumed Cruz opposed the TPP, while a majority offered the incorrect answer for Romney, Sanders, and Clinton. Lack of knowledge of Sanders' and Clinton's positions are particularly instructive. Respondents were more likely to be correct in their placement of Sanders than Clinton (overall difference = 0.10, $p < 0.001$), which makes sense in light of Clinton's previous support for the deal as part of the Obama administration. Party cues still exert a powerful influence, however, with a majority of respondents assuming that Sanders, who was a Democratic Socialist running in the Democratic Party primary, supported the TPP despite his consistent and vocal opposition.

Conclusion

As illustrated by the 2016 campaign, intra-party conflict is nothing new to the American political process (Noel 2014; Azari and Hetherington 2016). This paper explores the extent to which voters internalize the intra-party debates over policy positioning and what ideological labels mean for how voters link issue positions to politicians. Consistent with research that suggests many voters are unfamiliar with the policy content of ideological labels (e.g., Converse 1964; Arian and Shamir 1982; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017), we find that for a large segment of the population ideological labels attached to hypothetical members of Congress do not provide any additional policy content above and beyond party identification. However, the segment of the population who makes use of these labels does so in sensible ways that track real intra-party divisions and facilitates more accurate perceptions. Furthermore, when asked about presidential candidates, a larger segment of the population identifies policy differences within parties. Again, these perceptions track real intra-party divisions and the politically knowledgeable hold more accurate opinions.

The findings from this work have important implications for scholarship on political parties and polarization. It is notable that voters still discern intra-party policy differences even in an era of heightened elite polarization. Voters do not merely assume that the parties are equally distant from each other on every issue nor do they see members of each party as holding the same positions, as much of the existing literature would lead us to expect (Rahn 1993; Dancey and Sheagley 2013). Moreover, their perceptions in these areas are sensible. Individuals tend to see differences within parties – such as between Sanders and Obama on the TPP – where they exist. Party positioning still exerts an independent effect on how the public views individual politicians’ positions, however, with a majority of respondents assuming Sanders and Clinton supported the TPP despite their stated opposition.

Whether these perceived differences appear in lower salience races such as House and Senate primary elections is a question we are unable to answer here. Voters, especially those lower in political knowledge, presumably need a sufficiently rich information environment to make distinctions between candidates from the same party. This suggests that perceived intra-party differences may be reserved for only the most high-profile intra-party contests and that policy voting is similarly limited to these types of races and to more sophisticated voters.

Future observational work could take advantage of competitive House and Senate primaries to further our understanding of the extent to which voters make policy distinctions between candidates. A mix of experimental and observational research could also better inform our understanding of the extent to which policy disagreements between candidates affect vote choice in primary contests. For instance, when voters perceive policy differences, do they evaluate candidates on those grounds? Or do factors like the competitiveness of the race or a candidate’s race or gender drive vote choices for many voters (Henderson et al. 2019)?

In sum, although we find evidence that ideological labels provide policy information above and beyond partisan labels for some segments of the electorate, our results also reaffirm the limits of ideological reasoning in the public. Something close to half of the public seems unable to make meaningful policy inferences from abstract ideological labels. This segment of the public does not seem completely disconnected from political debates, however. Along with being able to recognize the issues that divide Democrats from Republicans, lower knowledge voters may also recognize intra-party divisions under certain circumstances. Even voters who do not think about politics in ideological terms may therefore be able to make meaningful policy distinctions between parties and candidates and potentially structure their vote choice accordingly.

Bibliography

- Achen, Christopher H., and Larry M. Bartels. 2017. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton University Press.
- Ansolabehere, Stephen, and Philip Edward Jones. 2010. "Constituents' Responses to Congressional Roll-Call Voting." *American Journal of Political Science*. 54(3): 583-597.
- Ansolabehere, Stephen, and Brian F. Schaffner. 2014. "Does survey mode still matter? Findings from a 2010 multi-mode comparison." *Political Analysis* 22(3): 285-303.
- Ansolabehere, Stephen and Brian F. Schaner, 2016. COOPERATIVE CONGRESSIONAL ELECTION STUDY: COMMON CONTENT. [Computer File] Release 2: August 4, 2017. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University [producer] <http://cces.gov.harvard.edu>
- Arian, Asher, and Michal Shamir. 1983. "The Primarily Political Functions of the Left-Right Continuum." *Comparative Politics*. 15(2): 139-158.
- Azari, Julia and Marc J. Hetherington. 2016. "Back to the Future? What the Politics of the Late Nineteenth Century Can Tell Us about the 2016 Election." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 667(1): 92-109.
- Barber, Michael and Jeremy Pope. 2018. "Who is Ideological? Measuring Ideological Consistency in the American Public." *The Forum* 16(1): 97-122.
- Bade, Rachel. 2018. "House Republicans Careen Toward Immigration Showdown." *Politico*, June 4: <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/06/04/immigration-dreamers-house-republicans-617945>.
- Carney, Eliza Newlin. 2015. "Standing Together against Any Action." *CQ Weekly*, March 16, 37-40.

- Claassen, Christopher, Patrick Tucker, and Steven S. Smith. 2015. "Ideological Labels in America." *Political Behavior* 37: 253-278.
- Converse, Philip E. 1964. "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in *Ideology and Discontent*, edited by David E. Apter. New York: Free Press.
- Dancey, Logan and Geoffrey Sheagley. 2013. "Heuristics Behaving Badly: Party Cues and Voter Knowledge." *American Journal of Political Science* 57(2): 312-25.
- Dancey, Logan, and Geoffrey Sheagley. 2016. "Inferences Made Easy: Partisan Voting in Congress, Voter Awareness, and Senator Approval." *American Politics Research* 44(5): 844-874.
- Dancey, Logan, and Geoffrey Sheagley. 2017. "Partisanship and Perceptions of Party-Line Voting in Congress." *Political Research Quarterly*: 1065912917722233.
- Darr, Joshua P., and Johanna L. Dunaway. 2017. "Resurgent Mass Partisanship Revisited: The Role of Media Choice in Clarifying Elite Ideology." *American Politics Research* (2017): 1532673X17735042.
- Delli Carpini, Michael X., and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*. Yale University Press.
- Ellis, Christopher and James A. Stimson. 2012. *Ideology in America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Fortunato, David and Randolph T. Stevenson. 2016. "Heuristics in Context." *Political Science Research and Methods*, 1-20.
- Franco, Annie, Neil Malhotra, Gabor Simonovits, and L. J. Zigerell. 2017. "Developing Standards for Post-Hoc Weighting in Population-Based Survey Experiments." *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 4(2): 161-172.

- Groeling, Tim. 2010. *When Politicians Attack: Party Cohesion in the Media*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Grossmann, Matt and David A. Hopkins. 2016. *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hare, Christopher, David A. Armstrong II, Ryan Bakker, Royce Carroll, and Keith T. Poole. 2015. "Using Bayesian Aldrich-McKelvey Scaling to Study Citizens' Ideological Preferences and Perceptions." *American Journal of Political Science* 59(3): 759-774.
- Henderson, John A. 2015. "Distance in Advertising: How Candidates Use Issues to Distort Voter Perceptions and Influence Choices." Presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.
- Henderson, John A., Stephen N. Goggin, Logan Dancey, Geoffrey Sheagley, and Alexander G. Theodoridis. 2019. "Ideology, Factionalism, and Electability: Assessing the Competing Preferences of Primary Election Voters." Presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago IL.
- Jacoby, William G. 1991. "Ideological Identification and Issue Attitudes." *American Journal of Political Science* 35(1): 178-205.
- Knight, Kathleen. 1985. "Ideology in the 1980 Election: Ideological Sophistication Does Matter." *The Journal of Politics* 47(3): 828-853.
- Kinder, Donald and Nathan Kalmoe. 2017. *Neither Liberal nor Conservative: Ideological Innocence in the American Public*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago.
- Levendusky Matthew. 2009. *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Levendusky, Matthew. 2010. "Clearer Cues, More Consistent Voters: A Benefit of Elite Polarization." *Political Behavior* 32: 111-31.
- Lewis, Jeffrey B., Keith Poole, Howard Rosenthal, Adam Boche, Aaron Rudkin, and Luke Sonnet (2019). *Voteview: Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database*. <https://voteview.com/>
- Lupia, Arthur. 2016. *Uninformed: Why People Know So Little About Politics and What We Can Do About It*. Oxford University Press.
- Mason, Lilliana. 2018a. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mason, Lilliana. 2018b. "Ideologues without Issues: The Polarizing Consequences of Ideological Identities." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82: 280-301.
- Milita, Kerri, Elizabeth N. Simas, John Barry Ryan, and Yanna Krupnikov. 2017. "The Effects of Ambiguous Rhetoric in Congressional Elections." *Electoral Studies* 46: 48-63.
- Miratrix, Luke W., Jasjeest Sekhon, Alexander G. Theodoridis, and Luis F. Campos. 2018. "Worth Weighting? How to Think About and Use Sample Weights in Survey Experiments." *Political Analysis* 26(3): 275-291.
- Noel, Hans. 2014. *Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America*. Cambridge University Press. New York.
- Park, Haeyoun and Wilson Andrews. 2017. "One-Third of Democratic Senators Support Bernie Sanders's Single-Payer Plan." *New York Times*, Sept. 13: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/09/13/us/sanders-medicare-for-all-plan-support.html>.
- Preston, Julia. 2016. "Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders Draw Distinctions on Immigration Policy." *New York Times*, March 10:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/11/us/politics/hillary-clinton-and-bernie-sanders-draw-distinctions-on-immigration-policy.html>

Rahn, Wendy M. 1993. "The Role of Partisan Stereotypes in Information Processing About Political Candidates." *American Journal of Political Science* 37(2): 472-496.

Rucker, Philip and Abby Phillip. 2016. "Clinton and Allies Attack Sanders on Gun Control Ahead of N.Y. Primary." *Washington Post*, April 11:
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/04/11/clinton-and-allies-attack-sanders-on-gun-control-ahead-of-n-y-primary/?utm_term=.234cbcc6b2e3

Sniderman, Paul M., Richard A. Brody, and Phillip E. Tetlock. 1993. *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology*. Cambridge University Press.

Tausanovitch, Chris, and Christopher Warshaw. 2018. "Does the Ideological Proximity Between Candidates and Voters Affect Voting in US House Elections?." *Political Behavior* 40(1): 223-245.

Tomz, Michael, and Robert P. Van Houweling. 2009. "The Electoral Implications of Candidate Ambiguity." *American Political Science Review* 103(1): 83-98.

Treier, Shawn and D. Sunshine Hillygus. 2009. "The Nature of Political Ideology in the Contemporary Electorate." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 73(4): 679-703.

Zaller, John. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.