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ARTICLE

The effect of real-news party cues

Rasmus Skytte[1,2]

[1]Researcher, VIVE–The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Copenhagen K, Denmark

[2]Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Aarhus University, Aarhus C, Denmark

Correspondence
Rasmus Skytte, Researcher, VIVE–The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Herluf Trolles Gade 11, 1052 Copenhagen K, Denmark.
Email: rask@vive.dk

Abstract

News media routinely offer cues about the stances of party elites, but to what extent do these cues shape the policy opinions of the public? While numerous experiments find that partisans adopt the stances of their leaders, these findings may not generalize easily to the context of real news, which often contains richer policy information and more subtle, ambiguous party cues than the artificial stimuli commonly employed. To investigate the impact of party cues as they naturally appear in news coverage—what I term *real-news party cues*—I develop a new experimental paradigm. I first sample 70 articles covering political proposals from a large pool of real news and prepare two versions of each: one with and one without these cues. These articles then serve as stimuli in survey experiments among representative samples of Americans ($n = 12{,}177$). I find that real-news party cues have mostly modest effects on policy opinions.

Since the birth of representative democracy, the press has informed citizens about the policy issues debated among their elected leaders. Yet, the purpose has evolved greatly over time. During the era of the party press, the goal of journalists was to ensure that citizens toed the party line. By faithfully promoting the policies of a single party, news media sought to reinforce party loyalty and align citizens' political opinions with party ideologies (e.g., Sloan, 1982). In stark contrast, mainstream journalistic norms now prioritize independence and balance with the aim of empowering citizens to critically assess the policies put forward by their leaders (e.g., Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). News media, modern standards hold, should inspire critical thinking, not reinforce party orthodoxy.

Paradoxically, there are reasons to suspect that political reporting continues to lead citizens to toe the party line. When covering policy issues, the news media routinely provide citizens with cues about where the parties stand. Prominent theories of opinion formation suggest that citizens respond to such cues by copying the stances of their preferred party, driven by partisan loyalty or cognitive expediency (e.g., Bakker et al., 2020; Bullock, 2020). Thus, while mainstream media now reject the ideals of the party press—and often scorn partisan media for reviving them—they may themselves enable citizens to mechanically follow their party. Simply linking party elites to policy stances could be enough to make partisans conform to the views of their leaders.

But is it? Do the party cues offered in real news—what I term *real-news party cues*—actually dictate citizens' policy opinions? The predominantly experimental literature on party cues offers no clear answer, as prior studies often rely on artificial stimuli that differ from real news in two important ways. First, the stimuli in prior experiments typically feature very clear and salient information about party positions, virtu-

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The Cornell Center for Social Sciences verified that the data and replication code submitted to the AJPS Dataverse replicate the numerical results reported in the main text of this article.

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ally ensuring that participants pick up and process the cues (e.g., Bullock, 2011; Cohen, 2003; Druckman et al., 2013). In contrast, real-news party cues are sometimes more ambiguous or subtle, meaning that even attentive audiences are not guaranteed to pick up the signals. Second, the stimuli often leave participants with limited options beyond relying on the cues provided, as they are given sparse policy details (e.g., Barber & Pope, 2019; Clifford et al., 2024; Nicholson, 2012) or asked to evaluate technical or unusual policies (e.g., Druckman, 2001; Kam, 2005). By comparison, news coverage of policies regularly presents competing arguments and policy consequences relevant to citizens' daily lives. These differences suggest that prior findings of sometimes large party cue effects may not easily generalize to the context of real news.

In this article, I develop a new method to examine the effect of real-news party cues, drawing on the classic work of Brunswik (1947, 1955). The intuition behind the procedure is simple: Just as we randomly sample respondents to make inferences about populations of people, so too will a random sample of stimuli license generalization over a population of stimuli. Thus, I first sample 70 articles from a large population of actual news stories that cover political proposals and contain party cues. Then, working with a journalist, I mask these real-news party cues to create a "control version" of each article. Finally, I use articles with and without cues as stimuli in two preregistered survey experiments conducted among representative samples of Americans. This method ensures that the stimuli closely resemble real news—preserving features such as the policy information included, the issues covered, and the clarity and salience of the party cues—while allowing causal identification by manipulating the presence of those cues.

My main finding is that real-news party cues do influence policy opinions, but at 3% of the outcome scale (.10 standard deviations), the average effect is relatively modest. Notably, the effect is smaller than the party cue effects recently observed by Clifford et al. (2024), Tappin (2022), and Tappin et al. (2023), who all studied party cue effects across several topics but in setups where participants received clear cues, as well as minimal or deliberately one-sided information about each policy proposal. Furthermore, the modest effect does not appear to be an artifact of pretreatment (Slothuus, 2016), as it remains small if the analysis is restricted to proposals about which citizens have limited prior knowledge of party positions.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of the democratic role of news media. In modern democracies, news media derive legitimacy from their ability to empower citizens to self-govern (e.g., Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021, ch. 1). However, if citizens simply align their opinions with the party cues provided in the news, the role of the news media shifts toward that of the party press: Instead of empowering citizens to lead, it permits them to follow. The current findings show that this dynamic is less pronounced than one might assume based on prior party cue research. Real-news party cues do influence policy opinions, but coverage of party stances does not dictate the views of citizens.

Importantly, this conclusion should not be mistaken for a claim that prior findings of strong party cue effects are wrong. Rather, previous party cue studies have pursued research objectives different from those of the current study and, accordingly, employed different designs. In particular, this study focuses on the effect of real-news party cues—the signals linking party elites and policies in actual news coverage. These include not only manifest statements about the positions of parties and prominent party leaders but also more subtle or ambiguous signals—such as policy endorsements from lesser known politicians affiliated with a party, including ordinary members of Congress, state politicians, and cabinet members—which may not even be the primary focus of the news story. By comparison, many prior experiments have intentionally provided participants with very clear and salient information about party positions in order to study what happens in instances when citizens actually learn such positions.

Further, the conclusion should neither be mistaken for the claim that parties are unimportant for public opinion. Party influence extends beyond real-news party cues to include elements such as framing and paid advertisements, but this study focuses solely on the former. Further, my findings align with prior research showing that citizens' opinions are shaped by perceptions of party positions (e.g., Freeder et al., 2019; Lenz, 2009). Specifically, I find that real-news party cues have a somewhat limited effect on how many know party positions, even among very attentive participants—thus, when citizens do perceive their party as taking some stance, it may significantly influence their own opinions.

In addition to expanding our knowledge of party influence and news media, this article makes a methodological contribution. Much, if not all, experimental research shares the challenge that results depend crucially on the specific configuration of the treatment material, which makes it hard to generalize from a single experiment to the broader phenomenon of interest (Fong & Grimmer, 2023; Reeves et al., 2016; Yarkoni, 2020). The new method of sampling and editing real-world content to improve external validity easily extends to the study of other phenomena, especially communication effects, suggesting promising avenues for future studies.

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THE UNKNOWN EFFECT OF REAL-NEWS PARTY CUES

This article defines real-news party cues as explicit references in real news content to political parties or politicians affiliated with those parties that have the potential to inform citizens about party policy positions. For example, a news story might report that a policy is supported by the Democratic Party or a specific Democratic politician, including both party leaders and less prominent figures, such as ordinary members of Congress, state politicians, and cabinet members.[1] The word *potential* is key, as the presence of real-news party cues does not automatically ensure that the news audience will form a clear understanding of party positions. As explained below, this depends on how clear and salient the cues are.

The primary goal of the article is to examine the extent to which citizens, when forming policy opinions based on real news, are influenced by the provision of these cues. This inquiry implicitly involves a counterfactual comparison between a world in which citizens are exposed to real-news party cues and one in which they are not. In effect, the central question becomes: How different would policy opinions be if these cues suddenly disappeared from the news?[2]

Prior research offers no clear answer. While decades of mostly experimental studies have found sometimes sizable effects of party cues on policy opinions, these findings are difficult to generalize to real-news party cues.[3] The key challenge is that real news stories tend to differ from the stimuli commonly used in experiments—usually a vignette or a mock news article—in ways that may dampen party cue effects. In what follows, I highlight two important sets of differences.

Real-news party cues are not always clear and salient

In prior experiments, party cues are often very clear, conveying highly diagnostic information about where entire parties stand (e.g., Boudreau & MacKenzie, 2014; Bullock, 2011; Cohen, 2003; Druckman et al., 2013; Kam, 2005). For instance, the presence of party cues is typically manipulated by providing information that explicitly links a policy to a political party (e.g., "Most Republican members of Congress support this policy") or a prominent party leader (e.g., "President Trump supports this policy"). While news stories can offer similarly clear signals, real-news party cues can also be less diagnostic, which may weaken their influence on policy opinions. For example, a story might mention that a less prominent party figure supports a policy, leaving citizens with the difficult task of inferring the party's overall stance based on a single, possibly unrepresentative politician—who may even be unfamiliar to many. Real-news party cues might also be less clear because the media report mixed views within a party, making it harder for citizens to discern its overall position (Levendusky, 2009, 2010).

A related difference between prior experiments and real news concerns cue salience. In experimental stimulus material, references to parties are often numerous or highlighted in headlines (e.g., Bullock, 2011; Kam, 2005; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). Real-news party cues can be similarly salient, but this is not always the case. For example, a news story might primarily focus on the consequences of a policy, with the politicians supporting it playing a secondary role, making it more difficult for citizens to pick up the signals about party positions.

News content often offers alternatives to cue-taking

Another set of differences relates to the information environment surrounding the cues. As mentioned, news stories about policies often include details about their consequences, and may also feature competing arguments from experts, interest groups, and political elites. This additional information may reduce the effect of real-news party cues, as it "allow[s] people to base their conclusions on messages other than cues" (Bullock, 2020; see also Chen & Luttig, 2021; Tappin & McKay, 2021). In contrast, many—though certainly not all—party cue experiments offer participants very limited information about the policies in question. For instance, participants may receive only a brief sentence or a few bullet points describing its content (e.g., Barber & Pope, 2019; Clifford et al., 2024; Druckman, 2001; Levendusky, 2010; Nicholson, 2012; Samuels & Zucco, 2014).

Relatedly, cue-based opinion formation has also been encouraged in many prior studies through the choice of issue. Specifically, some experiments have focused on technical or unusual policies—such as food irradiation (Bakker et al., 2020; Kam, 2005) or the programs embedded in the Tversky and Kahneman disease problem (Druckman, 2001)—that citizens might struggle to form opinions on without relying

[1] By including cues from both entire parties and individual politicians, I follow previous party cue research that has examined both types (e.g., Barber & Pope, 2019; Clifford et al., 2024; Druckman et al., 2013; Nicholson, 2012; see Bullock, 2020, on the importance of distinguishing between them).

[2] This question aligns with the typical party cue experiment, in which one group of participants reads a vignette or article that does not mention the parties' stances, while another group reads nearly identical information that does mention them (Slothuus, 2016, p. 304). Some previous experiments also examine the effect of switching the positions of the parties, but this is not the focus of the current study.

[3] Studies from recent decades rely almost entirely on experiments (Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2021, pp. 897–898), but I return to related observational studies in the discussion (e.g., Lenz, 2009, 2012).

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on cues (see Chong & Mullinix, 2019; Coan et al., 2008). While such proposals may occasionally appear in real news coverage, journalists often prioritize simplicity and relevance to their audience in both their choice of topics and their reporting on these topics. For instance, they tend to favor stories that can be given a human face or that affect a large number of people (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). In these cases, it may be relatively easier to form an opinion without a party cue, as the issue is more accessible or relatable.

SYNTHESIZING REPRESENTATIVE AND SYSTEMATIC DESIGN

The previous section suggests that, to examine the effect of real-news party cues, we need a design that captures the reality of actual news—both in terms of the party cues included and the information environment surrounding those cues. Importantly, this cannot be achieved with a single experiment using one set of stimulus material. The key challenge is that features such as the clarity and salience of party cues, as well as the information surrounding these cues, *vary* across news stories. Therefore, any single experiment—no matter how news-like its stimulus material appears—can inform us about only one slice of a diverse media reality.

The argument that we cannot readily generalize from a single set of stimulus material to a broader population of stimuli is not particularly novel. In fact, the point was made by psychologist Egon Brunswik more than 70 years ago. Brunswik warned against generalizing from experiments that rely on "systematic design" in which researchers artificially manipulate one or a few variables (e.g., the presence of party cues at a certain level of clarity and salience) while holding all other variables constant (e.g., the amount of policy information and the issue). To him, the key challenges of such designs were exactly that variables are often held constant and combined in unrealistic ways, and that each experiment informs us about effects in only one specific setup (Brunswik, 1947, p. 204; 1955). Since Brunswik, scholars in psychology, political science, and communication have noted similar challenges (e.g., de la Cuesta et al., 2021; Fong & Grimmer, 2023; Yarkoni, 2020).

To increase generalizability, Brunswik proposed a "representative design" paradigm. In representative design, stimuli should be representative of the population of stimuli over which researchers wish to generalize. Brunswik argued that researchers could attain such representativeness by sampling stimuli, similar to how researchers sample respondents to make inferences across populations of people. Essentially, stimulus material should not be constructed but collected and presented to participants as it appears in the real world. In this way, the natural variation of variables and covariation between variables is retained, making results more generalizable (Brunswik, 1947, 1955).

Representative design, as envisioned by Brunswik, is rarely used today. The idea was met with skepticism in his lifetime (Dhami et al., 2004), and "his concept of representative sampling died in the no-man's-land between hostile brothers" (Gigerenzer, 2010, p. 107). The opposition was understandable in some ways: Researchers turn to experiments to learn about causal effects, but if treatment material is sampled, empirical confounding becomes an issue. For example, using real media messages as stimuli creates the risk that "messages selected to represent one value on a variable […] differ systematically in unintended ways from messages selected to represent the other" (Slater, 1991). In the current case, it certainly seems likely that news with party cues differs from news without party cues. For example, the latter might focus on smaller, less important issues on which the parties have not bothered to take stances.

But what if we combine the best of both worlds? To enhance generalizability without sacrificing internal validity, I synthesize these approaches, extending recent work outside political science (e.g., Slater et al., 2009; Weisbuch et al., 2017). The basic idea is that researchers should first sample media content that contains the causal feature of interest (e.g., party cues) from the population (e.g., population of real news articles) over which they want to generalize. Researchers should then remove this feature to create control versions of each piece of media content. By doing so, researchers can isolate its causal effect while preserving two key aspects of the media environment: (1) All information other than the causal feature of interest varies as in real media content (e.g., the stimulus articles vary naturally in the issues they cover and the policy information they include) and (2) the treatment reflects real-world manifestations of the causal feature of interest (e.g., the party cues provided to treated participants are as clear and salient as those in actual news).

FIVE STEPS FOR SAMPLING AND EDITING TREATMENT MATERIAL

The proposed method has five steps, summarized in Table 1, to be undertaken before conducting an experiment. In this article, the method is used to study the effect of real-news party cues, but I return to alternative applications in the conclusion.

1. Define treatment target population. I define the target population as news articles published by the Associated Press between January 1, 2015, and January 1, 2020, that satisfy these conditions: The article

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TABLE 1 The five steps of the proposed method.

Step	General description of step	Implementation in current study
1	Define treatment target population	Define target population as news articles covering American policy proposals published by Associated Press between January 1, 2015, and January 1, 2020
2	Probability sample from target population	Sample 70 articles from the Factiva database; validate completeness of sampling frame, search string, and classification of articles
3	Preprocess to remove non-explicit features that allow inferences about feature of interest	Remove non-explicit information that allows inferences about the party affiliation of politicians or whether a policy is supported by Democrats or Republicans
4	Remove feature of interest to create control versions	Create a "no party cue" version of each article by removing references to political parties and by replacing names of politicians with alternative names
5	Assess realism of edited content	Hire journalist to evaluate realism of edited articles before launching study; ask study respondents to evaluate realism of articles

focuses on a political proposal or a bill from a local or national US politician or group of politicians, and the article contains explicit references to parties or politicians affiliated with those parties that have the potential to inform citizens about party positions.

By focusing on the Associated Press, I gain access to a diverse pool of news content that covers a variety of topics and is read by millions of Americans from both sides of the political aisle. As the largest news agency in the United States, the Associated Press produces content for more than 1,300 US newspapers and broadcasters, including major outlets like the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *New York Post*. These features are conducive to making claims about the effect of real-news party cues that citizens might encounter in everyday life. However, my definition also highlights targets over which I should feel less confident generalizing. The observed effect in written Associated Press articles may not travel to, say, televised news or news delivered on social media.

Focusing on the period between 2015 and 2020 ensures that population consists of contemporary news content. Furthermore, the period covers both a Democratic and a Republican presidency, as well as a transfer of majority control in the House of Representatives, making it difficult to guess the party promoting a proposal without the cues.

2. Probability sample from target population. The second step is to sample media content, which is crucial for external validity. If the sample is not representative of the target population, we cannot generalize the experimental results.

In this study, I used the Factiva database to sample articles. Upon ensuring the completeness of the database (see Online Appendix, p. 3), a search string was developed that identified almost all articles meeting the target population criteria (recall = 95%, see Online Appendix, pp. 2–3). Of the 165,086 identified articles, 800 were randomly drawn. As the search string had high recall but not high precision, some of these were outside the target population. Assistants, therefore, read each article and coded whether it met the criteria, leaving a simple random sample of 287 relevant articles. Intercoder reliability was high (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .89$, see Online Appendix, pp. 2–3). Finally, 70 articles were sampled for the experiment from the set of relevant articles.

In this last step, articles about national politics were oversampled to obtain equal shares covering national and state/local politics. As the Associated Press covers all 50 states, the bulk of its output focuses on state/local politics. Oversampling ensures that the sample matches the roughly equal national and state/local news shares in actual newspapers (Hopkins, 2018, fig. 9.3).

After sampling, the policy positions of the parties were coded based on the direction of the signals conveyed by the real-news party cues (see Online Appendix, pp. 15–16).[4] Table 2 shows Democrats endorsed 35 proposals, opposed 14, had unclear positions in seven, and were not mentioned in 14. Republicans favored 42 proposals, opposed 14, had unclear positions in five, and were not mentioned in nine.

Median article length was 317.5 words, which is longer than the stimuli used in most prior experiments, reflecting the often richer information environment in real news (however, see Bullock, 2011, for even longer articles). The median number of references to parties or specific politicians (i.e., potential party cues) was 9.5. While this median may appear high, the cues were often somewhat less salient than those in previous experiments, a point I return to when describing how the articles were edited. A license to use and edit the 70 articles was purchased from Wright's Media (License No. 2196315).

[4] For most articles, classifying party positions was straightforward, with little to no room for interpretation. In a smaller number of cases, some uncertainty regarding the correct positions to assign was present, usually because of intraparty disagreement. Importantly, excluding these articles has virtually no effect on the main results (see Online Appendix, pp. 15–16).

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TABLE 2 Party positions in sampled articles.

		Republicans…			
		Support	**Oppose**	**Unclear**	**No mention**
Democrats…	**Support**	14	10	2	9
	Oppose	11	0	3	0
	Unclear	5	2	0	0
	No mention	12	2	0	0

Note: The table displays party positions across the 70 articles. For details on the coding of party positions, see the Online Appendix (pp. 15–16).

3. Preprocess to remove non-explicit features that allow inferences about feature of interest. In the third step, so-called non-explicit features are removed. In the present case, these are article attributes that do not strictly fall within the definition of real-news party cues but can still be used to infer the party affiliation of politicians or the party sponsor of a policy. These attributes are removed to ensure that the articles, once the actual party cues are removed in the next step, give as few hints as possible about party positions.

The Online Appendix contains a comprehensive list of features regularly present in news that may serve as indirect party cue information (see Online Appendix, p. 4). Examples include information about where a politician is elected (e.g., their state or district), unique biographical information (e.g., "former owner of the Miss Universe pageant"), names of well-known policies or laws (e.g., the "Green New Deal"), and unique titles (e.g., "Senate Majority Leader"). In some cases, the information was simply removed (e.g., the name of a politician's district). In other cases, it was possible to retain the information in a more generic form (e.g., the "Green New Deal" became "proposed environmental and economic reforms;" a "Senate Majority Leader" became "leading Senator"). But in all cases, the goal was to alter as little as necessary to keep the original meaning intact.

4. Remove feature of interest to create control versions. The fourth step creates the experimental variation. In the present case, the preprocessed articles were edited to mask or delete real-news party cues, following a detailed manual (see Online Appendix, pp. 5–6). The most influential types of revisions were, first, to delete all references to politicians' party affiliation (e.g., remove the nouns and adjectives "Democrat(ic)," "Republican"), the names of the political parties (e.g., "Republican Party," "GOP"), and partisan-laden words (e.g., "bipartisan"). Second, politicians' names were replaced with randomly selected popular names for men and women born in 1970. By retaining the actual names in the cue versions, the treatment encompasses cues from party representatives in addition to references to the parties, consistent with my definition of real-news party cues.

Table 3 provides an example. The left column presents an article with only non-explicit information removed (the "cue" version), while the right column shows the article with party cues also removed (the "no cue" version). In this example, the real-news party cues are few, but they are relatively salient and clear, being present in the headline with a direct statement linking the party to the proposal. However, the cues were not always this obvious. For instance, in 34 out of 70 articles, the headlines in the "cue" and "no cue" versions were identical, meaning party cues were only present in the main text. Moreover, the cues in the articles were a mix of references to the parties and individual politicians—some of whom were not party leaders, which may make them less informative as signals of overall party positions. To give a sense of this variation: of the 36 edited headlines, 16 included a party label or party reference (e.g., "Republican," "Republicans," or "GOP"), 13 contained a reference to a president (e.g., "Trump"), five contained a reference to a member of Congress (e.g., "Rubio"), and 10 contained a reference to a state or local politician (e.g., "Whitmer"). The full treatment material for all articles is available online (see Skytte, 2025).

5. Assess realism of edited content. Finally, the realism of the edited content is assessed. To this end, a journalist with experience from an American newspaper was hired to read and comment on the edited articles, focusing in particular on whether the "no cue" versions were realistic. Her recommended changes were incorporated before launching the experiment. In addition, survey respondents were asked the following post-treatment question: "How realistic was the article as a piece of journalism that would be published in a newspaper?" Respondents found the articles to be realistic (average was .7 on a five-point scale, recoded to range from 0 [very unrealistic] to 1 [very realistic]). Critically, respondents assigned to the "no cue" versions thought they were as realistic as respondents assigned to the "cue" versions.

Related approaches

In political science, several innovative experiments have recently relied on multiple versions of the same treatment, but none of these follow my approach of manipulating features of interest in material sampled from a well-defined population. First, some studies have used multiple versions of the same treatment without experimentally manipulating any feature of interest. This includes Coppock et al. (2020), who examined the effect of real political ads; Clemm von Hohenberg (2023), who examined citizens' ability to discern fake news; and Fong and Grimmer's (2023) study of the effect of different features of tweets. Second, some studies have used multiple versions of

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TABLE 3 Example of "Party Cue" (left) and "No Cue" (right) versions of an article.

Republicans want to end lawmakers' unpaid sick leave benefit	**New bill will end lawmakers' unpaid sick leave benefit**
MADISON, Wis.—A pair of Republican lawmakers wants to do away with a perk for Wisconsin state senators and representatives.	MADISON, Wis.—A pair of lawmakers wants to do away with a perk for Wisconsin state senators and representatives.
They circulated a bill this week that would no longer allow state lawmakers to accumulate unused sick leave, which can then be converted to credits to pay for health insurance upon retirement.	They circulated a bill this week that would no longer allow state lawmakers to accumulate unused sick leave, which can then be converted to credits to pay for health insurance upon retirement.
The bill would not affect already accumulated credit. It is sponsored by Senator Rob Cowles and Representative David Steffen.	The bill would not affect already accumulated credit. It is sponsored by Senator Glenn Carter and Representative Michael Green.
Cowles also previously tried unsuccessfully eight years ago to do away with the perk.	Carter also previously tried unsuccessfully eight years ago to do away with the perk.
The 132 current state lawmakers have accumulated about $2.4 million in sick leave credit, or $18,300 per senator and representative. Last year, retired lawmakers used the credits to pay for more than $367,000 in health care premiums.	The 132 current state lawmakers have accumulated about $2.4 million in sick leave credit, or $18,300 per senator and representative. Last year, retired lawmakers used the credits to pay for more than $367,000 in health care premiums.

the same type of treatment without sampling these from well-defined real-world populations, making results contingent on the stimuli researchers choose to include. This includes Blumenau and Lauderdale (2024), who studied the persuasiveness of arguments across topics and rhetorical elements, and it includes Fong and Grimmer's (2023) study of persuasive information across vignettes with varying content. Third, some studies have sampled only parts of their stimulus material. This includes three studies examining the effect of party cues across samples of topics: Clifford et al. (2024), Tappin (2022), and Tappin et al. (2023). Importantly, these studies use stylized designs in which respondents receive clear and salient cues coupled with either minimal information (Clifford et al., 2024; Tappin, 2022) or deliberately one-sided information (Tappin et al., 2023) about the proposals. Thus, even these innovative studies, which the current study builds on, say little about the effect of real-news party cues.

The perhaps closest relatives to the five-step method come from psychology and communication. For example, Slater, Goodall, and colleagues sampled local news about accidents and crime and manipulated whether these contained mentions of alcohol (e.g., Goodall et al., 2013; Slater et al., 2009; see also Slater et al., 2015). Similarly, Lamer and Weisbuch (2019) sampled magazine pages and manipulated the vertical position of images. However, my method differs from these studies by containing steps 3 and 5, which are, I have argued above, necessary to ensure both internal and external validity.[5]

[5] It might also be worth comparing my method to a meta-analysis. The proposed method samples stimuli to allow generalization across a real-world stimulus population. In a meta-analysis, researchers have to average over the stimuli (and other study features) that other researchers have adopted, which will not necessarily reflect any real-world stimuli population (see also Simonsohn et al., 2022).

SURVEY EXPERIMENTS

A survey experiment was set up to examine the effect of real-news party cues. In the survey, respondents first answered questions about political interest and partisanship, followed by a few filler questions about housing. They were then told they would read a news article "written at some point between 2015 and 2020" and randomly assigned to one of the 140 conditions (the 70 articles with or without cues). After reading the article, respondents answered questions about their support for the proposal, how realistic the article seemed, and whether they thought Democrats and Republicans tend to support the proposal.

The experiment was fielded twice among American respondents recruited by YouGov. The first data collection (n = 8,039) took place in the fall of 2021 and the second (n = 4,138) in the spring of 2024. The core experiment remained the same across both data collections, but the second survey included additional questions beyond those outlined above. Specifically, the 2024 study included pretreatment attention checks, a factual manipulation check, and a question on how interesting the article seemed. Both non-probability samples roughly match the adult American population on gender, education, age, and region (see Online Appendix, p. 7).

Survey questions

Partisanship

Respondents answered questions regarding partisanship similar to those used in the American National Election Studies. Across the two samples, 5,824 identified as Democrats or as leaning toward the Democrats; 3,963 viewed themselves as Republicans or as leaning toward the Republicans. As preregistered, pure inde-

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pendents and respondents who did not reveal their party identification are excluded from the analysis.

Policy opinions

After reading the articles, respondents rated on a seven-point scale how strongly they supported or opposed the proposal in question. Since real-news party cues may push respondents in either direction of the scale depending on the party positions, the outcome was reverse-coded for some respondents to create a measure of support for the in-party position (see also Clifford et al., 2024; Tappin et al., 2023). Higher values imply greater agreement with the position of the respondent's party. For example, a high value is obtained if a Republican opposes (/supports) a policy opposed (/supported) by the Republicans mentioned in the article.

Following the preregistration, support was coded as missing in the few cases where the respondent's party expressed strongly mixed positions in an article. In addition, where an article contained no cues from the respondent's party—but included cues about the opposing party's stance—higher values correspond to the respondent supporting the opposite position of the opposing party. This coding choice, which was also preregistered, rests on the finding that partisans seek not only to align their opinions with their own party's stances but also to distance their opinions from out-party stances (Goren et al., 2009; Nicholson, 2012).

Attention and manipulation checks

The 2024 study included three attention checks at the beginning of the survey: one from Broockman and Kalla (2024) and two from Berinsky et al. (2014). The latter two were particularly challenging, featuring trick questions with instructions hidden in longer texts (see Online Appendix, p. 17). In supplementary analyses, I use these checks to investigate the effect of real-news party cues among highly attentive respondents. Additionally, the 2024 study featured a factual manipulation check following the experiment, in which respondents were asked to recall the proposal covered in the article (see Online Appendix, p. 18). 80% of partisans (including leaners) passed this check.

Perceptions of party positions

After stating their policy opinions, respondents were asked on a seven-point scale, "Would you say that Democratic [/Republican] politicians tend to oppose or support [the proposal], which the article mentioned?" I use these measures to examine—as studies of pretreatment effects suggest (Clifford et al., 2024; Slothuus, 2016)—whether real-news party cues affect opinions more on proposals where respondents (in the control condition) are less likely to know the parties' positions.

MODELING APPROACH

To estimate both the average effect of real-news party cues and the variation in effects across news articles, I rely on Bayesian multilevel modeling (see also Blumenau & Lauderdale, 2024; Clifford et al., 2024; Clifford & Rainey, 2024; Tappin, 2022), using `Stan` (Carpenter et al., 2017) implemented through R using `brms` (Bürkner, 2017). The technical details are in the Online Appendix (pp. 8–9). Here, the intuition behind the model is explained, drawing heavily on McElreath (2015, esp. ch. 12 and 13).

As a starting point, I assume that the article-specific cue effects in the sample of news articles emerge from a population of effects that follows a normal distribution, defined by two parameters: one for the *mean* (the average cue effect in the population) and one for the *standard deviation* (the variation in cue effects across articles). Before observing data, we are mostly in the dark regarding their values.[6] The task is to use data from the experiment to draw inferences about them. How does the model accomplish this?

Suppose an article has been sampled from the target population, covering, say, a gun control bill. Respondents are assigned to either the "cue" or the "no cue" version, and the real-news party cues increase support for the in-party position by 10 percentage points. Next, suppose another article has been sampled, covering a tax bill. Given the effect in the first article, what should we expect about the effect in this one? Surely, the effects are not identical, as the articles may differ on moderators such as the salience and clarity of the cues or the information surrounding them. On the other hand, the fact that cues move policy opinions on the gun control bill suggests that they probably matter to some extent in other articles as well.

The model's key feature is that, as it combs through the 70 article-specific experiments, it borrows, or *partially pools*, information from all the articles. This allows the model to continually update its estimates of the article-specific effects in a way that partly relies on what it learns from the other articles, but, importantly, it also uses this information to adaptively adjust its beliefs about the parameters I am ultimately after: the average effect of real-news party cues in the

[6] This vagueness is introduced using so-called "weakly-informative hyperpriors," but the results are robust to different specifications of these priors.

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population and the variation in effects across articles. It is to these estimates that I now turn.

MAIN RESULTS: REAL-NEWS PARTY CUES MODESTLY AFFECT POLICY OPINION

To what extent do real-news party cues dictate the policy opinions of the news audience? To answer this question, let us first consider the average effect of such cues on support for the position of one's party across the entire population of news articles. Panel A of Figure 1 shows three estimates of this effect: one based on the pooled data and one for each of the separate studies. As the dependent variable ranges from 0 to 1, the estimates show the average change as a percentage (in decimal form) of the policy support scale.

Panel A shows that real-news party cues do influence policy opinion. Pooling across both studies, partisans who read articles with cues were, on average, 3.3% (.10 standard deviations) more supportive of the in-party position than partisans who read the same articles without cues. The surrounding credible interval (CrI) shows that this effect is estimated with high precision. With 95% probability, the average effect lies between 1.9% and 4.8% of the scale. Looking separately at each study, we see estimates of fairly similar magnitude. In the 2021 study, the estimate is 4.0% of the scale (.12 standard deviations; 95% CrI: 2.2 to 5.7), while it is 1.9% of the scale (.06 standard deviations; 95% CrI: −.4 to 4.2) in the 2024 study. Although the point estimates suggest a greater effect in 2021, the 95% CrI for the difference spans from −.6% to 4.8% of the scale, making it unclear whether the 2021 effect was indeed larger.

Are these effects big or small? One possible benchmark is prior studies of party cues effects. In an earlier review, Bullock (2011) found that party cue effects ranged from 3% to 43% of the outcome measure. Tappin (2020, p. 33) found a similar range of effects in a more recent review, with two-thirds of studies finding at least one effect of 15% or more of the outcome scale. Clearly, the effects obtained in this study are modest in comparison, tracking the lower bound of previous estimates. Furthermore, the pooled estimate is roughly half as large as the effects observed in the recent studies of party cue effects across multiple topics (Clifford et al., 2024, p. 18; Tappin, 2022, p. 15; Tappin et al., 2023, pp. 570–571). Importantly, the fact that the present effects are modest compared to many prior experiments does not imply that those studies were somehow mistaken, as they were not designed to examine the effects of real-news party cues.[7]

[7] For instance, researchers have deliberately relied on stimuli with clearer and more salient cues, as well as different contextual information, as previously explained.

This discussion leads to the next important question: How much do the effects of real-news party cues vary across articles? Panel B provides the answer based on the pooled data. The black curve shows the distribution of effects in the article population, based on the pooled point estimate for the average effect (see above) and the pooled point estimate for the variation across articles (SD = 2.4% of outcome scale). The gray lines illustrate uncertainty by depicting 200 other possible distributions of effects sampled from the posterior distributions.

Panel B shows that effect sizes are similar across news articles, making large effects rare. In fact, 95% of article-specific effects fall within the interval between −1.3% and 8.0% of the scale's width. Thus, while effects of more than 15% of the scale are common in party cue studies, they almost never occur when examining the effect of real-news party cues in this population of articles.

For transparency, panel C contains a histogram of "raw" effects across the 70 articles, again based on the pooled data. Each observation is a simple difference in support for the in-party position when comparing the "cue" and "no cue" conditions (see Online Appendix, p. 14). These article-specific estimates are clearly more variable than the estimated distribution in panel B. However, it is important to emphasize that their spread is a poor indicator of how much effects differ across news articles in the target population. The reason is simple: The low number of respondents assigned to each article induces random variability not due to differences in true effect sizes across articles. Thus, the variance of these estimates is an *upwardly biased* estimator of the true variance of party cue effects in the target population (see Gelman et al., 2013, p. 94). A principal reason for using the multilevel model is to address exactly this challenge.

EXPLORING EFFECT HETEROGENEITY TO ADDRESS SIX POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

In the following, I explore variation in effects across subsets of respondents and articles. These analyses address six possible challenges to the conclusion that real-news party cues have only modest effects. The challenges all center on whether the previous analysis inadvertently underestimates the power of real-news party cues by relying on too expansive sets of articles or respondents. These analyses were not preregistered, except for the analysis addressing the second challenge regarding attention. All results rely on interaction models detailed in the Online Appendix (pp. 9–12).

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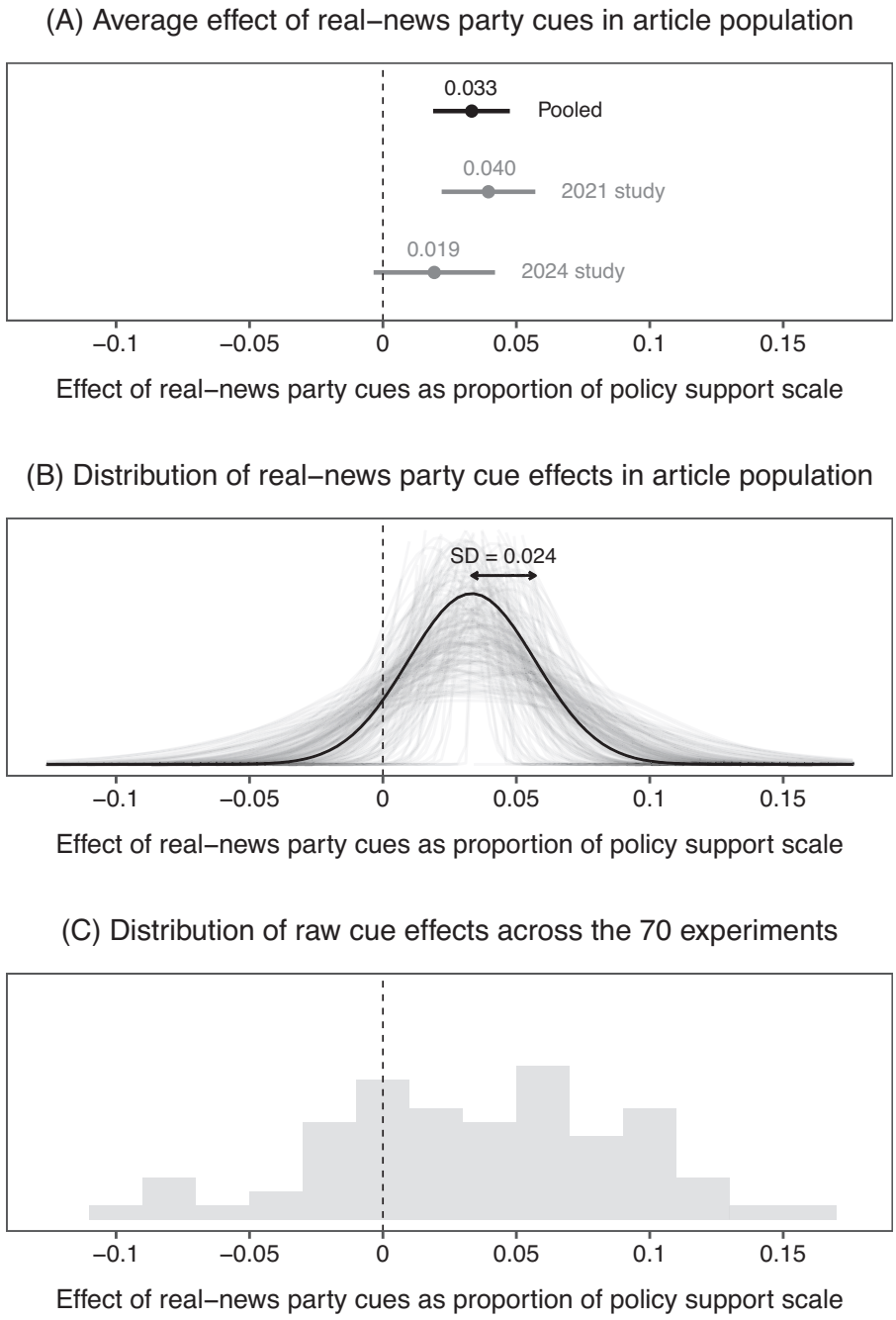


FIGURE 1 The effect of real-news party cues. *Note*: Panel A shows point estimates (dots) and 95% credible intervals (lines) for the average effect of real-news party cues on policy support. Panel B shows the distribution of article-specific cue effects based on point estimates for the mean and standard deviation (solid black line) and 200 other possible distributions drawn from the posterior (gray lines). Panel C is a histogram showing how much policy support differs between cue and control conditions in the 70 experiments. Panels B and C are based on the pooled data. See the Online Appendix for detailed results for the model underlying A and B (p. 9) and for the data used to construct C (p. 14).

Challenge 1: Are effects strong when pretreatment is low?

Some prior experiments deliberately rely on low-salience topics (e.g., Levendusky, 2010, pp. 119–120), since party cue effects are diluted when citizens already know or can guess party positions (Clifford et al., 2024; Slothuus, 2016). Would I find strong effects if focusing only on proposals with low levels of pretreatment? To examine this, I follow Clifford et al. (2019) who argue that "awareness on control issues can be used to indicate the extent of pretreat-

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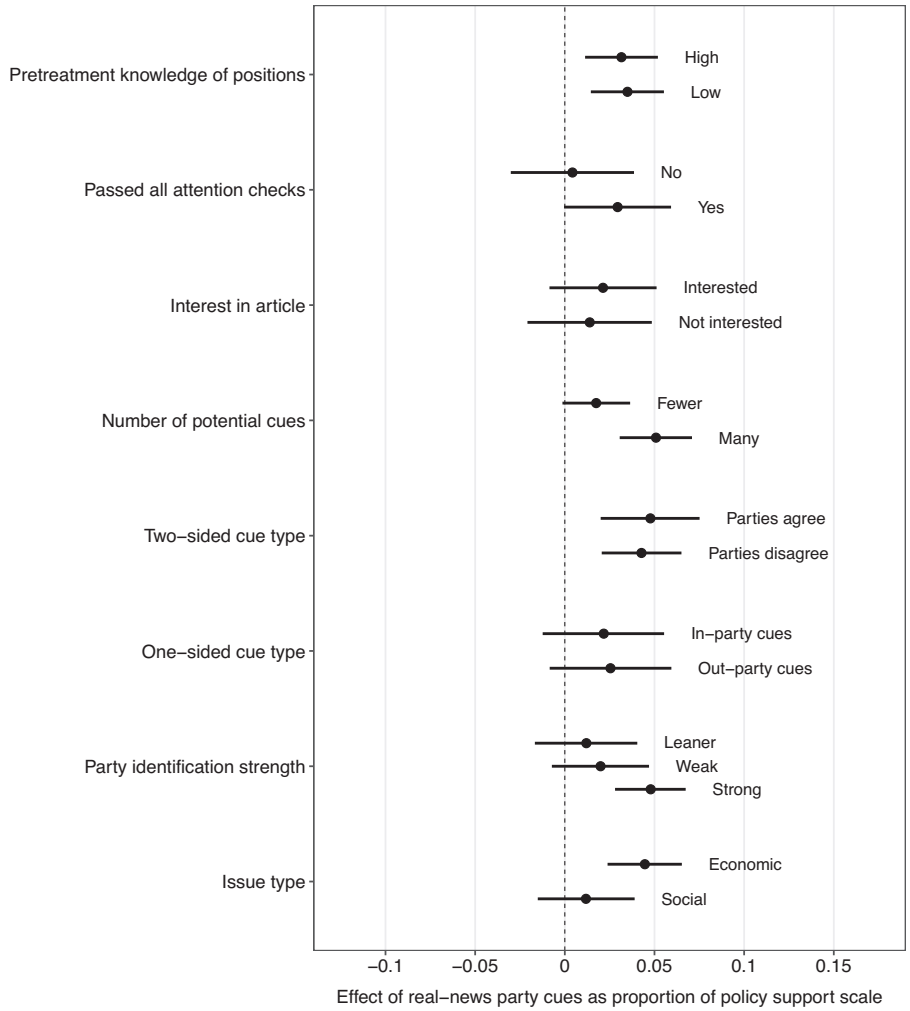


FIGURE 2 Effect of real-news party cues across subsets of respondents and articles. *Note*: The figure shows point estimates (dots) and 95% credible intervals (lines) for the average effect of real-news party cues on policy support in various groups of articles and respondents. See the Online Appendix for detailed results (pp. 9–12).

ment." For each article, I first calculate the share of respondents in the "no cue" condition who correctly identified the parties' positions as presented in the "cue" version. Then, I dichotomize this article-level measure by its median (37%) and compare the effects in the two resulting groups. Figure 2 shows that the average effect in articles with lower levels of pretreatment is 3.5% of the scale (.11 standard deviations; 95% CrI: 1.5 to 5.5). While this effect is slightly larger than in articles with higher pretreatment levels (3.2%; .10 standard deviations; 95% CrI: 1.1 to 5.2), it is limited compared to prior studies. Importantly, this conclusion holds under alternative cutoffs. For example, the effect remains relatively modest at 4.5% (.14 standard deviations; 95% CrI: 2.0 to 6.9) in the third of articles with the lowest levels of pretreatment. In sum, the conclusion of modest effects does not appear to be an artifact of studying proposals on which respondents already know or can guess party positions.

Challenge 2: Are effects strong among attentive respondents?

The presence of so-called shirkers in online samples can dilute experimental effects (e.g., Berinsky et al., 2014). While there is no indication that my respondents were particularly inattentive—80% of partisans correctly answered the factual manipulation check in the 2024 study—it is worth exploring whether effects are stronger when focusing solely on highly attentive respondents. To identify such respondents, the 2024 study included no fewer than three attention checks. Overall, 58% of partisans passed every check, indicating a very high level of attention. Another 24% passed two checks, and 18% passed one or none of them. The second row of Figure 2 shows that among those who passed all checks, the average effect of real-news party cues is 2.9% of the scale (.09 standard deviations; 95% CrI: −.0 to 6.0). In contrast, among those who passed

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two or fewer checks, the effect is merely .4% (.01 standard deviations; 95% CrI: −3.0 to 3.9). Although we cannot conclusively say that the effect is larger among the attentive—the 95% CrI for the difference ranges from −1.9 to 7.0—these findings do suggest that inattention is diluting the effect of the real-news party cues. However, it is also evident that the effect, even among the highly attentive, remains modest relative to previous studies.

Challenge 3: Are effects strong among those interested in the articles?

In this study, respondents read random Associated Press articles, but one might object that citizens do not choose real news at random. Instead, they select articles that match their interests, likely increasing their engagement. Would I find strong effects by focusing solely on instances where citizens found the article interesting? To address this, the 2024 survey included a post-treatment question asking respondents how interesting they found the article, with answers given on a five-point scale ranging from "very uninteresting" to "very interesting." The third row of Figure 2 compares the effect of real-news party cues among the 60% of partisans who found the article at least "somewhat interesting" to the effect among all other respondents. We see similar effects across the two groups, with effect sizes remaining modest.[8]

Challenge 4: Are effects strong for certain configurations of cues?

One might also object that my target population is too broad, since it includes some articles where the real-news party cues are relatively subtle, as explained earlier. Would focusing solely on articles with very salient cues yield stronger effects? To explore this, I use the number of references to parties, presidents, and named politicians as a proxy for cue salience, as higher counts generally reflect more potential cues. The fourth row of Figure 2 compares the effect in articles where this number exceeds the median (9.5) with the effect in the remaining articles. At 5.1% of the scale (.16 standard deviations; 95% CrI: 3.1 to 7.1), the effect in articles with more references is clearly larger. This suggests that the sometimes subtle nature of real-news party cues does contribute to their modest effect.

In addition to varying in quantity, real-news party cues vary in type. Following Bolsen et al. (2014), we can differentiate between articles with cues from both parties taking different stances, both parties taking the same stance, only the in-party, and only the out-party. Perhaps strong effects for one of these types are masked in the main analysis? The fifth and sixth rows of Figure 2 show the average effect of real-news party cues for each type. For all types, we see relatively modest effects, with point estimates being less than 5% of the outcome scale. However, signals from both parties tend to produce slightly bigger effects, with the effect of real-news party cues from disagreeing parties at 4.3% of the scale (.14 standard deviations; 95% CrI: 2.1 to 6.5), and the effect of real-news party cues from agreeing parties at 4.8% (.15 standard deviations; 95% CrI: 2.0 to 7.5).

Challenge 5: Are effects strong among strong partisans?

All previous analyses include leaners, weak party identifiers, and strong party identifiers. Would I find strong effects by restricting the analysis to respondents with stronger partisan attachments? To test this, the seventh row of Figure 2 compares the effect of real-news party cues among the three groups. As expected, we see that the effect is notably stronger among strong identifiers, with an average effect of 4.8% of the outcome scale (.15 standard deviations; 95% CrI: 2.8 to 6.7). Yet, it again remains rather modest relative to previous findings.

Challenge 6: Are party cue effects strong on economic issues?

Prior research suggests stronger party cue effects on economic issues (e.g., financial regulation) than on social issues (e.g., LGBTQ+ rights). Perhaps I would find strong effects by focusing solely on economic issues? To examine this, the proposals were categorized using a classification similar to Clifford et al. (2024, supplementary material). Of the 70 proposals, 21 were social, 35 were economic, and 14 classified as both/neither. The bottom row of Figure 2 shows that the effect of real-news party cues is 1.2% of the scale (.04 standard deviations; 95% CrI: −1.5 to 3.9) on social issues, while it is 4.5% on economic issues (.14 standard deviations; 95% CrI: 2.4 to 6.5). Thus, while the effect is not strong for either type, it does appear larger on economic issues.

Summary

Overall, the influence of real-news party cues is somewhat modest across all examined subsets of articles and respondents, with the largest point estimates

[8] A potential obstacle is that interest was measured after the treatment was administered, which could introduce post-treatment bias. Reassuringly, the party cue treatment did not affect interest in the articles.

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reaching 5% of the outcome scale. However, we do observe meaningful variation, including the finding that effects are larger when the cues are more salient, more closely resembling the stimuli of many prior experiments.[9]

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The next three sections explore the implications and limitations of my findings. First, I consider how my findings enhance our understanding of the democratic role of news media. Next, I discuss how my findings relate to prior observational studies showing beliefs about party positions to structure citizens' opinions. Finally, I highlight key questions that remain for future research.

Covering political elites while escaping the role of the party press

What is the role of news media in democracy? Since the early years of the American republic, a fundamental duty has been to inform the public about the policies promoted by political elites. However, the nature of this role has undergone significant changes. During the era of the party press, journalists served as partisan advocates: Through selective and opinionated reporting, they promoted the policies of a single party before a partisan audience, ensuring that this audience followed the party line. The role of the media changed markedly in the 20th century, as "good journalism […] became journalism that enabled citizens to form their own opinions about politics" (Zaller, 2003, p. 114). Thus, mainstream journalistic norms now prioritize independence and balance, aiming to empower citizens to critically assess the policies put forward by their leaders (e.g., Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021).

This study sheds light on whether these modern ambitions are undermined by the mere act of providing the public with cues about party stances. If citizens, when forming opinions based on news, simply imitate the positions taken by representatives of their party, modern news media would seem to fulfill the aims of the party press—helping partisans toe the party line. To be sure, modern journalistic norms certainly do not hold that citizens should not agree with their preferred party, but journalists commonly strive to cultivate a "critically minded citizenry" (Hanitzsch et al., 2019; see also Hanitzsch, 2011, p. 487) and provide citizens "a basis for [their] opinions independent of what government officials recommend" (Zaller, 2003, p. 116). These ideals appear challenged if citizens' opinions are dictated by real-news party cues.

The present findings indicate that this is not the case: Real-news party cues do influence policy opinions, but the effects are modest. This suggests that the media can cover the policy stances of political elites without promoting party orthodoxy in which citizens align with their party's stances on the mere basis of shared partisanship. This finding is particularly important as real-news party cues would not be easy to separate from actual political reporting. Not only is it practically difficult to cover a political system dominated by parties without providing such cues, but they are also essential if citizens are to choose leaders based on their policy stances (see, e.g., Gelman & King, 1993, p. 449).

The importance of beliefs about party positions

If we turn our focus from the parties in news coverage to the parties in people's heads, it is important to emphasize that my findings do not imply that beliefs about party positions are unimportant for opinion formation. Several observational studies have focused on such beliefs (e.g., Freeder et al., 2019; Lenz, 2009; Slothuus et al., 2024), so it is important to consider how they relate to—and differ from—the causal feature of interest in this study.

In the current study, participants are compliant if they read the news articles. Ideally, they should read them as they normally read articles, since the goal is to examine the influence of party cues when citizens consume real news. However, reading the articles does not guarantee that participants in the cue condition will form a clear belief about where the parties stand. As described, real-news party cues—unlike those of many prior experiments—are not designed to maximally impact perceived party positions. Thus, they are not always very clear or salient, featuring, for instance, lesser known politicians whom some people might not recognize or consider representative of the party. Furthermore, real news often presents a richer informational environment, including policy details or frames from political elites. This allows news consumers some autonomy in deciding what to focus on, and even highly attentive respondents may not retain party cue information if they do not consider it relevant to the issue at hand.

Across my two studies, exposure to real-news party cues increased the share who place the parties in accordance with the party signals presented in the original article by 9 percentage points. This is on par with, for example, the difference between conditions in Lenz's (2012, ch. 8) experiment, but clearly, not everyone updated their perceptions of where the

[9] Additional analyses in the Online Appendix (pp. 12–13) examine moderation by party identification, general political interest, and the political level, finding larger effects among the politically interested and in articles covering national politics.

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parties stand. Even among the highly attentive respondents who passed all attention checks, the increase remains modest at 12 percentage points. These numbers are important to keep in mind when comparing the present findings to prior observational research on party cue-taking. In some observational studies finding large effects, the independent variable of interest is not exposure to cues, but *learning party positions* (e.g., Lenz, 2009; Slothuus et al., 2024). It might very well be that citizens, when they actually come to see their party as having taken some stance, shift their opinions markedly.

Limitations and future directions

A key limitation of this study is that respondents read only one news article. This makes it difficult to determine how well the findings apply to situations where an issue is extensively covered over longer periods, exposing citizens to multiple stories about the same proposal. The effect of real-news party cues on policy opinions might be greater in such instances, as exposure to multiple articles increases the likelihood that citizens update their perceptions of where parties stand. Yet, this conclusion is not a given. Repeated exposure to news about a proposal also entails repeated exposure to substantive information and frames, potentially dampening the effect of party heuristics (Bullock, 2020; Tappin & McKay, 2021). Given this limitation, future research may examine how real-news party cues affect policy opinions when citizens are exposed to multiple articles.

Another limitation is that this study focuses solely on the United States. While many previous studies on party cues share this context, there is also relevant research from other countries, particularly in Europe (e.g., Brader et al., 2013; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). Do my findings speak to the power of real-news party cues in these other contexts? At first glance, the United States might appear a most likely case for finding large effects, given widespread party identification and well-sorted parties. If so, we might expect effects to be on par or smaller in European countries. Yet, the content and framing of news also matters, making definitive predictions difficult. For example, if American news outlets are more active in questioning politicians' motives, as suggested by the prevalent use of strategic frames (e.g., Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2012; Patterson, 1994), it might reduce citizens' desire to follow their party (Robison, 2022).

A third limitation is that this study cannot explain why real-news party cues have modest effects compared to many previous experiments. Is it because of the policy information, the topics covered, the salience and clarity of the cues, or some combination of these and other moderators? This study cannot answer this question because it is essentially about how much larger effects would be if real news articles were different from what they actually are. For example, to examine the extent to which policy information in real news articles is suppressing the effects, we would need a study comparing party cue effects in real news articles (this study) to their effects in otherwise identical articles containing no policy information (mimicking many prior experiments). Future studies might allow such comparisons by also removing additional features of the news articles.

A final limitation is the lack of proper benchmarks against which to evaluate the effect sizes. As mentioned, the obtained effects are mostly modest compared to prior experimental findings, but perhaps we should be hesitant to use prior experiments as a benchmark. Specifically, the frequent use of stylized experiments in political communication research may have accustomed us to large effects that are rare for any type of communication. Thus, real-news party cues need not be less important for public opinion than other features of news content, but we know little about this, as experimental researchers rarely replicate real-world conditions systematically.[10]

ALTERNATIVE APPLICATIONS OF NEW METHOD

In addition to advancing our understanding of how news media and parties influence public opinion, this article offers a five-step method for sampling and editing stimulus material that can help researchers tackle a fundamental problem of experimental social science. Often, our phenomenon of interest varies along a wide variety of dimensions, and we can study only a few of them at a time. This is true not just for party cues, but for a wide variety of phenomena, such as attack rhetoric, game frames, and personalized representation (see, e.g., Aalberg et al., 2012; Fridkin & Kenney, 2008; van Aelst et al., 2012). When phenomena belonging to the same category differ, researchers have multiple, sensible ways of designing their stimulus material. While this may sound advantageous, it makes it hard to generalize from a single experiment to the broader phenomenon of interest (Fong & Grimmer, 2023; Yarkoni, 2020). The problem is that each experiment informs researchers about the effects of the specific stimulus adopted (e.g., a specific rhetorical attack with fixed topic, sender, target, level of incivility), not about the effects of the category to which it

[10] Scholars have long debated whether media generally have substantial or minimal effects (e.g., Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). However, a recent review encompassing religion, demagoguery, propaganda, political campaigns, and advertising concludes that "communication is much less influential than often believed" (Mercier, 2017). In light of this review, the modest effects observed are less surprising.

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belongs (e.g., rhetorical attacks). As Brunswik (1955) noted, the challenge is similar to how one cannot draw inferences about a population of people by studying just one individual.

Using the new method, researchers do not have to rely on just one version of their stimulus material, as this material is sampled to capture the variation present in the population of interest. Importantly, the method maintains the internal validity of more traditional experimental designs by systematically removing the causal feature of interest to isolate its effect. For example, in the case of attack rhetoric, researchers might sample transcripts from political debates and mask attacks on opponents or change them into promotional statements. Similarly, when examining game frames, researchers might sample news articles and remove framing devices (e.g., references to opinion polls and election outcomes). Naturally, the method is not suited to every research purpose. For example, researchers aiming to develop theory or test interventions may be better served by creating their own, possibly stylized, stimulus material. The method's perhaps greatest potential lies in the study of political communication and news media, where scholars are often interested in the effects of real-world phenomena that are relatively easy to edit and sample.

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