Does Issue Importance Attenuate Partisan Cue-Taking?

Abstract

Are cues from party leaders so important that they can cause individuals to change their own issue positions to align with the party's position? Recent work on the importance of party cues suggests they do, especially given the literature on partisanship as a strong and persistent group identity. However, in this paper we test the limits of those partisan cues. Using a unique two-wave panel survey design we find that the effect of party cues is moderated by the prior level of importance individuals place on an issue. We find that when a person believes an issue area to be more important, party cues are less likely to move that citizen's position. Our results show evidence that an individual's own issue positions—at least the important ones—can be resilient in the face of party cues.

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While the correlation between partisanship and voters' issue positions is well-established, there is significant debate surrounding the direction of the influence an individual's policy views have on the formation of a partisan attachment, and vice versa. Do the effects of socialization and group identity (Campbell et al., 1960; Tajfel, 1981; Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2004) overwhelm the importance of issues (Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder, 2008; Lewis-Beck, Nadeau and Elias, 2008; Orr and Huber, 2019)? In other words, which is paramount, loyalty to party or issue positions?

Recently, Barber and Pope (2019) showed that people's partisan affect leads them to move—in both a liberal or conservative direction—when shown a policy cue from the president (and though it was more strongly demonstrated for Trump, they did find an effect among Democrats related to Obama). This party loyalist behavior came despite the ideological direction of the cue and occurred for both strong partisans and strong ideologues.[1] Furthermore, this finding is one among many. Hill and Huber (2019) show that when people receive knowledge of the partisan composition of a Congressional roll call vote they change their own issue positions to better align with their party's elected officials. Lenz (2012) also shows that citizen attitudes are powerfully shaped by signals from party leaders.[2] However, these studies leave open the question of whether partisans' issue positions *on all issues* are moveable by the party leader's current set of positions. Are there limitations to this powerful effect of partisanship?

There are reasons to believe cues can sometimes have little impact. Mullinix (2015) tested a combination of issue importance and polarization and found that the public is not blindly attentive to partisan cues at least on tax and education policy. Agadjanian (2019) shows that conflicting intra-party information also attenuated the impact of partisan cues. In this paper we take a broad cross-section of issues to see whether or not issue importance might also attenuate partisan cue taking. In other words, is partisan cue-taking impacted by the degree to which a person cares about a particular issue? Building on the design of Barber and Pope (2019) we show that survey respondents are far less likely to adjust their issue positions to align with cues from the President on issues the respondent considers important. Thus, the strong party cue effects found in existing literature are largely because people are more willing to adjust their stated issue positions to align with the party on issues they don't care much about. While we find that party cues do matter, the impact of such a cue is diminished by nearly half when respondents indicate caring a great deal about that particular policy area.

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[1] It was also more powerful among Trump-approving voters than it was among non-approving respondents
[2] See also Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus (2013); Bolsen, Druckman and Cook (2014).

Partisan Cues & Issue Importance

The idea that cues influence people's opinions extends back to Asch (1952) who showed that the source of the message changed how individuals interpreted the message and any accompanying information. More recently, Barber and Pope (2019) showed that a party leader's issue positions actually moved partisans in both a liberal or a conservative direction on various policies, depending on the ideological direction of the cue the partisans received. However, Barber and Pope (2019) did not directly test issue importance, which has received relatively less attention in the literature, despite being an important factor that may impact the effect of a cue on a person's policy views.

At the same time, prior research has shown that issue importance matters in a number of other contexts. For example, public opinion research shows many members of the public care about at least a few issues (Converse, 1964; Petrocik, 1996) and that parties tend to "own" those issues in the public's mind (Egan, 2013). Krosnick (1988) finds a strong effect of issue importance for attitude stability over time, and Jacks and Devine (2000) show that people resist persuasion on issues that are important to them because people are able to more quickly bring to mind thoughts and feelings that help them defend their attitude against persuasion. Furthermore, research shows that during political campaigns, people choose to focus on partisan campaign material related to the issues they cared most about (Iyengar et al., 2008; Henderson, 2013), perhaps muting the effects of new information.

It is important to note that we are not discussing "issue salience", or aggregate measures of issue importance here. Salience is typically defined as the aggregate importance of issues in the general public (Niemi and Bartels, 1985; Mummolo, Peterson and Westwood, 2019). However, in our case we are interested in knowing how individual citizens are moved (or not moved) by partisan cues on individual issues that are important to them. Given this, it is vital to note that one person's policy mountain is another person's political molehill. In other words, aggregate measures of issue salience, though useful for many purposes, may hide any effects because of the heterogeneity of importance placed on a particular issue across the population.[3] With this concern in mind, we use a unique two-wave approach to first gather data on the importance respondents placed on a host of issues before introducing a partisan cue on that same issue at a later point in time.

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[3]In fact, when running the same models discussed below with aggregate salience rather than individual issue importance, we obtain null results. These are shown in Table A3 the online supplemental materials.

Empirical Strategy

The data come from the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), where we conducted a two-wave panel survey in the weeks before the November general election and then immediately after the election. In the first wave of the study we measured issue importance across 20 different issues among 1,033 people.[4] In the second wave of the study we asked respondents their position on the same twenty issues that appeared on the first wave of the survey in a series of support (1)/oppose (-1)/don't know (0) questions.[5] A random sample of respondents were asked their views on the 20 policy issues without any cue (N = 358). A second random sample of respondents were presented with a cue indicating that President Trump had taken a liberal position on the policy (N = 351) and the remaining third group of respondents were presented a cue indicating that President Trump had taken a conservative position on the policy (N = 324).[6] The first wave took place several weeks before the second wave of the survey where we administered the treatment and recorded the outcome variable. This period of time between survey waves was crucial because it reduces the possibility that the questions of issue importance in wave 1 biased responses in wave 2 by priming particular issues in the minds of respondents.

This experimental design in wave 2 is a near-replication of Barber and Pope's (2019) work where they presented respondents with similar cues from Donald Trump in both a liberal and conservative direction. The design has the particular virtue of, "Trump's non-ideological and ever-changing issue positions . . . allows us the unique opportunity to identify moments when issue content and party are in conflict. And this divergence allows us to identify which of these attachments appears to be more important in the minds of the typical citizen" (Barber and Pope, 2019, pg. 43). While we replicate the question design and use of Donald Trump as the cue giver, we use a number of additional issues beyond those that were included in the Barber and Pope (2019) study.[7]

An important virtue of this design is that by asking issue importance for each issue among each respondent, we have variation in the importance of issues by individual and not merely a measure of which issues are salient to the overall public. With this design, our unit of analysis is the individual-issue dyad, allowing for variation across and within individuals, which provides a great deal of statistical power while also allowing for estimating both between-subjects and within-subject effects. This design sets up a very

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[4]The question asked: "How much do you care about the following issue areas? For these questions, it does not matter what your particular position is, just how much you care about the issue," followed by a five point response scale ranging from "very much" to "not at all." A list of all twenty issues used and the particular wording of each question is available in Section 1 of the online supplemental materials. Section 11 shows that key predictors of importance are strength of partisanship, self-described ideology and political knowledge.

[5]See Section 2 of the online supplemental materials for the exact wording of the twenty policy questions.

[6]Balance tests of various demographics in Table A1 of the supplemental materials show that there were no observable differences, on average, between the three different groups.

[7]Despite three years in office, Trump remains ideologically ambiguous across all 20 issues we measured, illustrated by recent statements for and against gun control, climate change, trade, and other issues.

simple test: as issue importance rises for each individual-issue dyad does the effect of an ideological cue decline? If it does, then issue importance acts to attenuate the effect of elite cues. This is an important empirical improvement over previous designs which do not test issue importance for individual respondents and issues.

Results

The main findings of Barber and Pope (2019) replicate (see Table A2 of the supplemental materials), allowing us to focus on the variation in how much people respond to the cues based on individual levels of issue importance shown in Figure 1. There is a great deal of variation both across issues and questions. A decomposition of variance shows that approximately 70% of the variation in issue importance is due to within-subject differences in importance with the remaining 30% due to variation across respondents, establishing clear differences in how important people think issues are—even if they lean towards calling most issues important (48% of respondent-issue dyads were rated as 'very important', 30% 'important', 14% 'neutral', 5% 'not that important', and 3% 'not at all important').[8] As a result, studies of issue importance and partisan cue taking that use aggregate measures of issue salience will not account for the significant variation across issues, within individuals. An individual-level measure of importance provides a much cleaner test of the theory and permits a within-subject design that accounts for respondent-specific features when conducting our analysis.

Table 1 presents the results from a series of regression models that test whether partisan cues are diminished by higher levels of issue importance. In each model the dependent variable is an indicator of support for the liberal position on each policy question.[9] The "Liberal Trump" and "Conservative Trump" variables indicate the ideological direction of the treatment, with the comparison group being the control group that saw no cue. The issue importance variable is the five-point measure of issue importance with 5 being the highest level of importance. The cue treatment is then interacted with the measure of issue importance to test our hypothesis that increased issue importance will attenuate the impact of the Trump cue and should be negative in the case of the liberal cue and positive in the case of the conservative cue.

Table 1 includes a number of different model specifications to show that our results are not dependent on a specific design. Some models include controls for the respondent's average level of issue importance (4

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[8]Our results are robust to the exclusion of individuals who provided the same level of importance for all 20 issues — see Table A5 in the online supplemental materials.

[9]The dependent variable is coded 1 when the respondent is in favor of the liberal position on the issue and -1 when the respondent is in favor of the conservative position. 'Don't know' respondents are included as zeros. Models that exclude 'don't knows' (Table A6) are shown in the online supplemental materials as well as a depiction of support for each policy question in the control group (see Figure A1.)
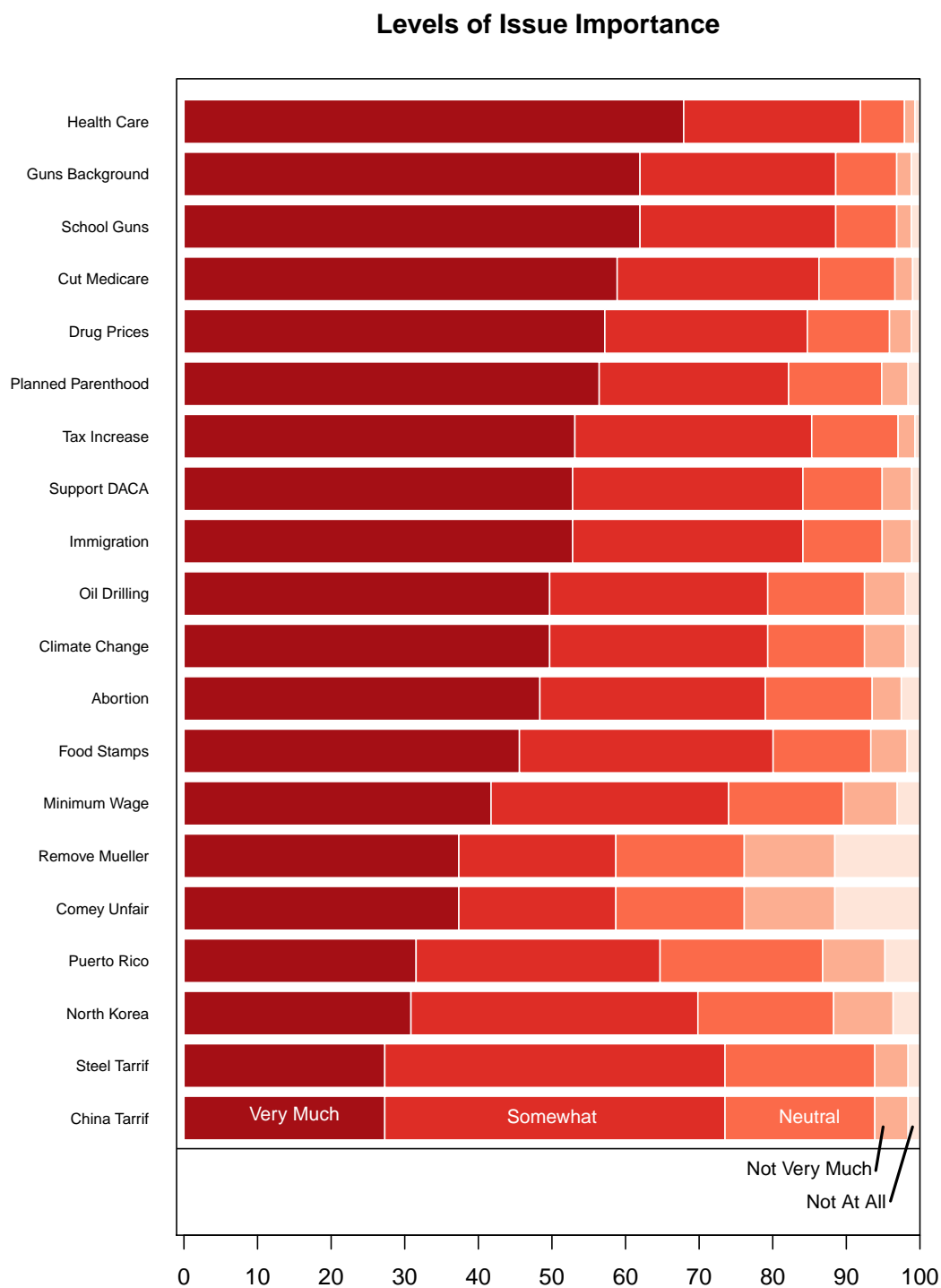
Levels of Issue Importance

Figure 1: Aggregate Levels of Issue Importance. These average values are from questions asked of respondents in the first wave of the two-wave survey.

& 5). Others control for partisan strength, political knowledge,[10] Trump approval, and symbolic ideology (7 & 8). Finally, Models 2 and 6 include respondent-level fixed effects where the models are identified by within-respondent variation in issue importance across issues. Models 3, 5, 6, and 8 include issue fixed effects where the models are identified by variation in importance within-issues across respondents. Model 6 includes both issue and respondent fixed effects. Given space constraints, we will speak about the broad results since the effects across all models are very similar.

Table 1: Main Issue Importance Results

Liberal Trump	0.18**	0.24***	0.20***	0.18***	0.20***	0.26***	0.25***	0.27***
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Conservative Trump	-0.11	-0.10*	-0.12*	-0.13	-0.14**	-0.11**	-0.10	-0.11*
	(0.08)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.09)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.06)
Liberal Trump x Issue Importance	-0.02*	-0.04***	-0.03 **	-0.02 **	-0.03*	-0.04***	-0.03**	-0.04***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Conservative Trump x Issue Importance	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Issue Importance	0.22***	0.11***	0.20***	0.11*	0.07***	0.08***	0.13***	0.11***
	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.01)	(0.06)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.01)
Respondent Mean Issue Importance				0.36***	0.39***			
				(0.06)	(0.03)			
Political Knowledge							-0.01	-0.01*
							(0.01)	(0.004)
Partisan Strength							0.02*	0.02**
							(0.01)	(0.01)
Trump Approval							-0.26***	-0.26***
							(0.02)	(0.01)
Ideology							-0.12***	-0.12***
							(0.01)	(0.01)
Fixed Effects:		Respondent	Issue		Issue	Issue & Respondent		Issue
SE Clustered by:	Issue	Issue	Respondent	Issue	Respondent	Issue	Issue	Respondent
N	20,499	20,499	20,499	19,628	20,503	20,499	18,967	18,967

Note: Coefficients reported from ordinary least squares regression model, with standard errors in parentheses. In each model the dependent variable is coded 1 if the respondent indicated supporting the liberal policy option and -1 if they supported the conservative policy option. Issue Importance is measured as the importance placed by each respondent on each issue and ranges from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very much). Significance codes: $*p < 0.1$, $**p < 0.05$, $***p < 0.01$, two-tailed tests.

With respect to the interaction between the liberal Trump treatment and issue importance, the effects are unambiguously clear: the negative coefficient indicates that issue importance attenuates the effect of the liberal cue. In other words, when President Trump signals that he has a liberal position on an issue, on average respondents follow the direction of cue and are more likely to provide a liberal response. However, people who care the most about an issue are the least likely to be moved. The estimated impact of the liberal cue (Using Model 2 in Table 1 that includes respondent fixed effects) for people who care little about the policy is 0.20 (0.24 - .04 × 1 = .20) while the impact of the liberal Trump cue for people who care very much is only 0.04 (.24 - .04 × 5 = .04). This interaction is statistically significant (p < 0.05) across all eight

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[10]Butler and Hassell (2018) show that cues can be limited in the face of prior knowledge.

models, regardless of controls.[11]

The liberal treatment interaction with the issue importance variable is always negative and statistically significant. And while the interaction of issue importance with the conservative Trump cue is very consistent and always in the expected positive direction, these results fail to achieve statistical significance.[12] The main effects of the conservative treatment are also in the expected negative direction and do achieve statistical significance in five of the eight models. Why is the attenuation effect smaller here? One possible reason is that respondents most likely to be moved by a Trump cue are "pre-treated" by conservatism (Slothuus, 2016) before they ever see the conservative Trump cue. Note that the coefficients on the baseline effect for the conservative Trump treatment (row two of Table 1) are smaller than are the liberal Trump cues in the first row. This raises the possibility that the conservative Trump cue has a smaller effect overall because there is a limitation on how much Trump can have an effect in a conservative direction. As a result, the effect of the interaction is likewise smaller because the main effects are also small, i.e. there is less of a treatment effect to attenuate. Thus, the impact of caring about the issues may be particularly salient when the party cue is in the counter-stereotypical direction (Agadjanian, 2019), in this case in the liberal direction from a Republican president.

Discussion

This research provides three important findings. First, we have replicated the original results of Barber and Pope (2019), confirming clear cue effects on policy views. Second, and more importantly, we find clear support for the idea that issue importance acts as a barrier to ideological cues. Issues that are subjectively more important to a respondent are less likely to be affected by a cue. Finally, there is evidence that this result may be asymmetric across the ideological direction of the cue. This evidence, however, is not overwhelming because of the asymmetry of the party of the cue giver in our experiment. Observing the Democratic equivalent to Donald Trump would certainly strengthen this hypothesis and allow for a more complete test of the theory. However, the results shown here are still strong evidence that issue importance does matter.

The results for the interaction of issue importance with the liberal Trump cue are large (reducing the cue's impact to less than half the size of the main effect), in the hypothesized direction, and were statistically significant across a wide variety of model specifications. And while the interaction of issue importance with

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[11]The overall pattern for both the liberal and conservative treatments is displayed graphically in Figure A2 of the online supplemental materials. We also test for a non-linear interaction in Table A4 in the supplemental materials and find similar results.

[12]Within each model the standard error for the interaction of salience and the conservative cue is nearly the same size as the interaction of salience with the liberal cue. However, the coefficients are much smaller, leading us to believe this is a difference in the treatment magnitude and not a lack of statistical power.

the conservative Trump cue was not statistically significant, it was in the hypothesized direction across all of the models—strongly suggesting that issue importance attenuates party cue effects.

While the overall experiment shows that party leader cues have great power in shaping people's views, it is not the case that party leaders are entirely unconstrained in their ability to shape public perceptions. There are limits to what they can accomplish. Citizens will only be pushed so far and only for certain issues. This also suggests that issues and issue salience are in some ways less well-understood components of partisanship. Though, on average, partisanship may be an identity with relatively little issue content, there are likely circumstances under which people's partisanship is deeply connected to their issue positions. This provides clear support for the idea that issue importance should be considered in the study of ideology and partisanship.

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