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# Communicating policy information in a partisan environment: the importance of causal policy narratives in political persuasion

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## ABSTRACT

Public opinion is frequently formed in an environment of both partisan signals and other types of policy information. How do people form opinions in such an environment? Much of the literature suggests that most people simply align their opinions with those of their party. We examine a condition under which people may rely instead on a more normatively defensible criterion: policy information. We argue that what people want in terms of policy instruments are effective tools for achieving their desired end-state. When information clearly communicates that a policy will lead to a desirable outcome, we hypothesize that it will be persuasive *even* in a context where party leaders provide countervailing signals. In two experimental studies, we find support for this hypothesis, and we find some evidence that such information also reduces reliance on partisan cues. We show that causal narratives are central to the opinion formation process and that communicating this information can improve the quality of public opinion.

**KEYWORDS** Causal narratives; partisan cues; public opinion

## Introduction

The political parties in America have undergone a revolution over the past few decades. As Rosenfeld (2018) has described, in the middle of the twentieth century many analysts understood the “big tent” non-ideological parties of the time to be effective given “that both Democrats and Republicans shared core premises and ultimate goals, while differing on the methods to achieve them” (Rosenfeld 2018, 57). Since that time, political activists motivated by contrasting visions on everything from economics to social issues slowly but steadily altered the nature of political conflict to revolve around ultimate goals or end-states, and not merely focusing on different policy instruments to achieving an “American consensus.” However, there are still

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a number of issues for which the preferences of Democrats and Republicans resemble the attitudes of a bygone political era, in which both sets of partisans share common goals and concerns but differ in their belief about which policy solution would lead to their preferred end-state.

For example, large majorities of Democrats and Republicans recognize that inequality is growing in the United States and perceive inequality as an important problem. Yet Democrats and Republicans are deeply divided over solutions to rising inequality (Pew Research Center 2014). Similarly, majorities of Democrats and Republicans believe that improving education is an important national priority, but disagree over specific policy solutions that are intended to improve education outcomes (Pew Research Center 2015). These are issues over which both Democrats and Republicans share what Arnold (1992) would describe as *outcome* preferences – they want the same outcome, less economic inequality and better educational outcomes. However, when it comes to specific *policy* preferences, the two major parties often provide competing cues about what position co-partisans should take, and the American populace is exceedingly good at following these cues (Kunda 1990; Lenz 2012; Lodge and Taber 2013). The result is that – even in areas where mass Democrats and Republicans share outcome preferences about the preferred “end-state” they would like to see – Democrats and Republicans split in their opinions about the policy solutions they favor.

Given this state of affairs, we ask whether and/or how the communication of information about the effectiveness of different policy solutions affects the opinion formation process over issues towards which there is something close to a bipartisan consensus over preferred outcomes or end-states. Are people persuaded by information which provides them with a causal connection between a particular policy instrument and a desirable end-state? How effective is this information when compared to cues from party leaders?

Much of the literature on public opinion formation suggests that – as long as partisan cues are available – Democrats and Republicans will follow those signals and ignore other available information (e.g. Berinsky 2007; Cohen 2003; Lenz 2012; Zaller 1992). For example, Cohen (2003) shows the power of party cues in a set of foundational experiments. In one experiment on welfare policy, Cohen (2003) manipulated both the generosity of a hypothetical welfare policy (one generous policy and one stringent) and the endorsement of the policy by either the Democratic or Republican Party. The key finding was that regardless of whether the welfare policy was described as generous or stringent, Democrats followed the policy supported by the Democratic Party while Republicans support the policy ascribed to the Republican Party. This tendency to follow party leaders appears to be especially strong in highly polarized environments like those that define American politics today (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Mullinix 2016).

Indeed, in a recent and telling analysis, Barber and Pope (2019) exploit President Donald Trump's ideological flexibility to examine how Republican partisans respond to cues which they experimentally manipulate such that in some cases Trump is associated with a conservative policy position and in other cases, with a liberal policy position. They find that many more Republicans are party loyalists – taking up Trump's stance, liberal or conservative, as their own – than are policy loyalists. The upshot is that cues from party leaders, when available, dominate the opinion formation process.

Nonetheless, scholars have identified some instances where information is able to overcome partisan loyalties. For example, in a series of experiments on attitudes toward health care, Bullock (2011) shows that as long as people have a large amount of information, that information will be as persuasive as cues from party elites. Similarly, Boudreau and MacKenzie (2014) show in an experimental context covering a diverse range of policy issues that individuals are often willing to abandon partisanship when information is presented. Malhotra and Kuo (2008) demonstrate that, in addition to party cues, information about the office held by an official influenced blame attribution in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook (2014) lay out two conditions that may reduce the influence of partisan motivated reasoning: inducement to form an accurate opinion and bipartisan support. And Arnold's (1992) prominent theory of congressional behavior is predicated upon the argument that citizens' *policy* preferences depend upon their beliefs about the causal connection between policy instruments and societal outcomes.

Our study extends recent research on the role of information in public opinion formation to test Arnold's (1992) insight about the centrality of beliefs regarding cause and effect to mass belief systems. Stone's (1989) research comes closest to evaluating this argument. Arguing that societal problems can be defined as either "accidental," with no human cause, or one of three causal types (intent, mechanical, or inadvertent), Stone observes that actors who benefit from the status quo will favor accidental descriptions of problems, while those who want to change the status quo prefer a frame that focuses on human causality. If respondents agree that a problem exists and they are convinced of the causal argument that places blame on human actions (or lack thereof), Stone (1989) argues that we will see higher levels of support for policies to remedy society's ills.

Stone's (1989) research points towards the importance of notions of causality in the realm of political judgment. But we conceptualize causal narratives in closer alignment with Arnold's framework. In this framework, causal narratives are conceptualized in terms of the link between policy instruments and particular outcomes or end-states. As he states, citizens often "lack policy preferences simply because they don't understand the precise relationship between policies and outcomes" (18). Thus, we test the hypothesis that

clear “cause–effect” policy information (i.e. causal narratives) – that which connects a *policy* to an *outcome* – may be an especially persuasive type of information to the public when forming opinions about public policies.

Perhaps more importantly, we evaluate this hypothesis in the context of an information environment which also contains partisan cues. As noted earlier, many studies suggest that the presence of partisan cues swamps other information, either because partisan cues provide a trustworthy and accessible heuristic or generate processes of partisan motivated reasoning. Do causal policy narratives still matter to the formation of policy preferences in an environment where partisan cues are available? And, how do partisan cues and causal policy narratives interact with each other when both are available?

On the one hand, a number of scholars have identified factors which can lead to a reduction in partisan cue-taking (e.g. Arceneaux 2008; Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Ciuk and Yost 2016; Groenendyk 2013; Kam 2005; Klar 2014; Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012; Leeper and Slothuus 2014; Mullinix 2016; Nicholson 2011; Nir 2011; Petersen et al. 2013; Sheagley 2019; Slothuus and De Vreese 2010). We believe that the presence of causal policy narratives may also reduce the need for partisan cues and therefore weaken their influence on public opinion. Thus, the effect of partisan cues should be attenuated in the presence of clear causal policy narratives relative to instances where the link between the policy instrument and outcome is unclear.

Alternatively, the effect of clear causal policy narratives may simply be additive, shaping policy preferences alongside partisan cues. Under this scenario, the relative influence of partisan cues does not change in the presence of clear (or unclear) policy information. Clear information is still important (if our first hypothesis holds) as it increases overall support for effective policy solutions. It does not, however, have the added advantage of reducing the influence of partisan cues. Instead, differences will continue to remain between respondents who receive congruent and incongruent partisan cues, but the overall levels of support will increase with causal information about the positive consequences of the policy.

Of course, the literature also suggests that all individuals are not equally likely to form opinions on the basis of partisan cues. Some studies have found that those with high levels of political knowledge engage in directionally-motivated processing more than those with lower levels of knowledge (Lenz 2012; Lodge and Taber 2013). Others find that partisan cues have their strongest effects among respondents with low levels of political knowledge (Barber and Pope 2019) or awareness (Kam 2005). Among the most consistent moderators of partisan cues is strength of partisanship: strong partisans tend to rely the most on partisan cues when they are available (e.g. Barber and Pope 2019). Ultimately, political knowledge is a strong moderator of partisan effects, whether by providing individuals with stronger

partisan attitudes to defend (a la motivated reasoning) or by reducing attitude strength and allowing for reliance on party cues (as in the cue-taking literature) Thus, in addition to our hypotheses listed above, we also examine whether political knowledge and partisan strength condition the effects of both clear causal policy narratives and partisan cues.

## Research design

We test these hypotheses with two separate experiments (one on Head Start and another on reforming Education Standards), both collected using Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) online workplace.<sup>1</sup> The use of Mechanical Turk as a convenience sample in the social sciences has received considerable scrutiny (e.g. Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012; Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling 2011). While we cannot be sure that our findings would perfectly replicate across samples, a number of studies are converging on the encouraging finding that inferences from experiments in Mechanical Turk replicate across sampling platforms (Coppock 2019; Mullinix et al. 2015). These analyses provide a reasonable basis for assuming that our experimental results are not limited in scope or biased by the use of Mechanical Turk participants.

We chose these two policies – Head Start and Education Standards reform – as they are not especially salient, at least during the political environment in which the experiments were conducted. As policies that are not yet fully sorted by partisanship, they are the precisely the types of issues where past research suggests that party cues have *large* effects (Ciuk and Yost 2016; Slothuus 2016). Therefore, the two policy issues we choose should be biased towards exhibiting large party cue effects and present a conservative test for our hypothesized effects of causal policy narratives.

Both experiments are a 2 (clear vs. unclear causal narratives) x3 (Democrat support vs. Republican support vs. no partisan source cues) between-subjects design that compare clear vs. unclear causal policy narratives, but they do so in different ways. In the Head Start experiment, the *unclear* causal narrative is presented as a result of not enough research on the topic. In the Common Core experiment, the unclear causal narrative is presented as a result of conflicting findings between research teams. The party cue manipulations follow past research in comparing a party stereotypical treatment and a party counter-stereotypical treatment to a no party cue condition (e.g. Bullock 2011). We have no *a priori* expectation about whether party cues pointing in the stereotypical or counter-stereotypical direction will be most persuasive relative to the no-cue control condition. In either case, we can compare the effect of policy information to the effect of party cues when those cues run in typical and atypical directions. Together, this design provides an in-depth analysis about the

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<sup>1</sup>Data and replication materials are available from the corresponding author.

consequences of different types of information communicating the effects of specific policy instruments (Head Start and Common Core) on a widely desirable end-state, improving America's educational system.

### **Head Start experiment**

Our first study looks at the issue of Head Start funding, a policy issue focused on reducing inequalities between low income and high income students in educational achievement. The study was conducted on May 1 and 2, 2014 and the sample (952 total respondents, 631 partisans) displayed characteristics typical of MTurk samples. Respondents skewed Democratic (62%), liberal (58%), and white (78%). Men constituted 55% of the sample and 88% of the sample attended some college. The median household income ranges from \$40,000–\$50,000 and the average age of the respondents was 33. Respondents in this study were paid \$1.00 for their participation. In a pretreatment survey, respondents were asked a series of demographic and other questions. After finishing the pretreatment survey, participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions. Respondents could receive clear or unclear information about the effectiveness of the policy and they could receive no partisan cue, a Democratic support/Republican opposition cue, or a Republican support/Democratic opposition cue. These constitute the six potential experimental conditions. After assignment to the condition, respondents read an article describing the proposed legislation.

The manipulation of clear vs. unclear causal policy narratives was subtle but provided participants with information about the efficacy of Head Start programs and the level of scientific agreement about the results of the program. Participants assigned to the *clear information condition* saw the following paragraph (embedded as the third paragraph of nine):

Independent analysts weighing all of the evidence about the effectiveness of the Head Start program indicate that, overall, Head Start **produces benefits to participants including some long-term gains that decrease the achievement gap between high income and low income children**. The connection between educational disparities between low and high income children and government programs to reduce these disparities is **clear**. Based on these findings, analysts **believe that increased spending on Head Start could lower the "achievement gap" between high and low income children**. Independent analysts have identified some additional areas for improving Head Start, however. One analyst of the Head Start program, for example, claims that with greater deregulation and less micromanagement, the Head Start program could be even more effective.

On the other hand, those assigned to the *unclear information condition* saw this paragraph, also embedded as the third paragraph in the story:

Independent analysts weighing all of the evidence about the effectiveness of the Head Start program indicate that, overall, Head Start's **long-term benefits for**

**decreasing the achievement gap between high income and low income children are inconclusive.** The connection between educational disparities between low and high income children and government programs to reduce these disparities **needs more data before the connection is well understood.** Based on these findings, analysts **are not sure whether or not increased spending on Head Start could lower the “achievement gap” between high and low income children.** Independent analysts have identified some additional areas for improving Head Start, however. One analyst of the Head Start program, for example, claims that with greater deregulation and less micro-management, the Head Start program could be even more effective.

Out of nine paragraphs in the story, the only difference on information clarity occurs in these paragraphs.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the clarity manipulation, we also manipulate the direction and presence of partisan cues associated with the supporters and opponents of the bill. The full text of these manipulations can be found in Appendix A. Our presentation of partisan cues is buttressed by relatively strong arguments in favor or in opposition to the bill. This provides an even more difficult environment to identify the effects of policy information than a simple partisan source cue.

Following the article, respondents were asked a series of questions designed to reinforce the key clarity manipulation, without reinforcing the partisan cue. We include our manipulation reinforcement to ensure that the policy information and partisan cues were evident to respondents. In addition, the reinforcement more closely mimics an information environment where policy claims are reiterated.<sup>3</sup> After the reinforcement questions, respondents answered a series of questions about their perceptions of the policy's efficacy and their level of support for the policy. These questions form our two dependent variables: (1) support for the bill to expand Head Start funding and (2) perceptions of Head Start's effectiveness. These questions tap two important types of support: specific policy support (measured with the question “Based on what you have read and what you know about the program, do you support or oppose the bill to expand federal and state funding for Head Start?”) and general perceptions of policy effectiveness (measured with the question “How effective do you believe Head Start is at preparing children for kindergarten?” with a seven-point response set ranging from “very

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<sup>2</sup>While we do include a non-partisan condition for the party cues, we do not include such a condition for the clarity manipulation. We made this decision based on the logic that there is no neutral ground between clear and unclear causal narratives and the fact that these were largely uncrystallized issues at the time of the experiments. Furthermore, our interest is in the comparative influence of clear versus unclear causal narratives, rather than clear versus no information.

<sup>3</sup>The manipulation reinforcement asks respondents to re-read the paragraph detailed above, which describes the causal effects of the program on education outcomes. They were then asked to rate the trustworthiness of the independent analysts described in the paragraph. Text of the manipulation reinforcement can be found in the appendix.

effective” to “very ineffective”). We model both outcomes using ordinary least squares regression.<sup>4</sup>

We evaluate our hypotheses with a simple modeling strategy. We begin by constructing a dummy variable for whether the respondent received clear (1) or unclear (0) information. We also constructed variables indicating whether a respondent received a pro-partisan cue (Democrats receiving the Democratic support cue or Republicans receiving the Republican support cue) or counter-partisan cue (Democrats receiving the Republican support cue or Republicans receiving the Democratic support cue). We compare both treatments to the no party cue control group. We group partisan leaners with the party they lean towards, and drop pure Independents from the analysis. To assess our second hypothesis (that partisan cues are less influential in the presence of clear information) we interact these categorical variables (models 3–4). Because the experimental treatments were fully randomized, we do not control for other predictors of support for Head Start, but all results are robust when controlling for standard political and demographic correlates of Head Start attitudes.<sup>5</sup> The results from our main analysis appear in [Table 1](#).

Models 1 and 2 in [Table 1](#) present the direct treatment effects of clear vs. unclear causal policy narratives, pro-partisan cues, and anti-partisan cues. As these models show, counter-partisan cues (i.e. partisan cues that are in opposition to Head Start) reduce support for Head Start. This is consistent with many findings about the reliance on partisan cues in public opinion formation. Our more notable finding is the effect of the clear information treatment on political attitudes. Presenting individuals with clear causal policy narratives significantly increases support for Head Start and perceptions of the policy’s effectiveness. The size of the clarity coefficient is noticeably larger than the effects for partisan cues and the effects are more consistently statistically significant. We thus find evidence for the influence of clear causal policy narratives on Head Start support and perceptions of the policy’s effectiveness relative to unclear policy information. Individuals who received policy information that clarified the connection between a policy and outcome did in fact update their beliefs in the direction of the information they encountered (H1).

Importantly, this effect of clear information holds even when the partisan cues run counter to the partisan beliefs of the respondent. If we restrict our analysis only to those individuals who received a cue that the opposite party supported the policy (counter-partisan cues), the effect of clear policy information is still strong, significant, and positive. Clear information increases support ( $\beta = 0.12, p < 0.01$ ) and beliefs about the effectiveness of the policy ( $\beta = 0.09, p < 0.01$ ). Thus, the primary effect of clear policy information is to

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<sup>4</sup>All of the results are consistent if ordinal logistic regression is used instead.

<sup>5</sup>In a full multivariate robustness check, we have controlled for: party identification, ideology, age, sex, race, income, and education. Results do not change in any meaningful way by controlling for these variables.

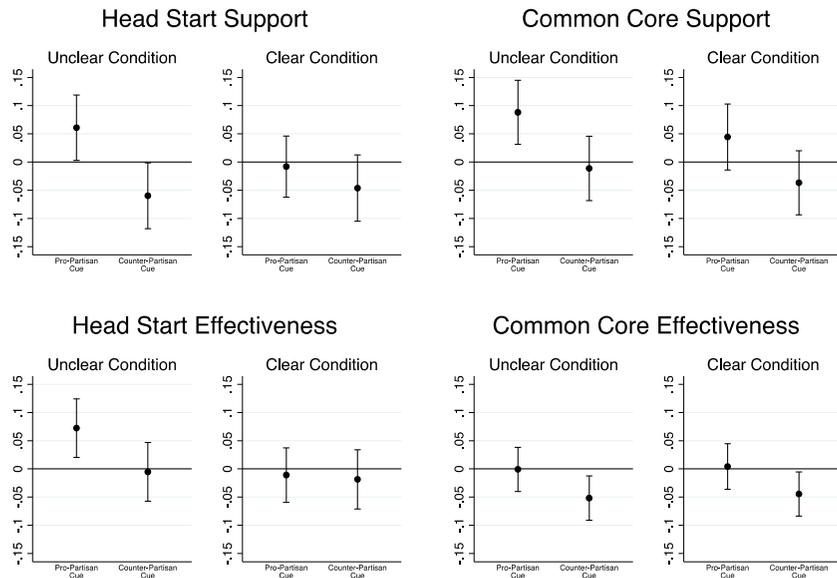
**Table 1.** Head start policy.

	Head start support	Head start effective	Head start support	Head start effective
Pro-partisan cue	0.02 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	0.06* (0.04)	0.07** (0.03)
Counter-partisan cue	-0.05** (0.03)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.06* (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)
Clear information	0.08*** (0.02)	0.07*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.03)	0.10*** (0.03)
Pro-partisan × clear information	-	-	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.08* (0.04)
Counter-partisan × clear information	-	-	0.01 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.04)
Constant	0.65*** (0.02)	0.63*** (0.02)	0.64*** (0.02)	0.62*** (0.02)
<i>N</i>	631	631	631	631
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.042	0.031	0.047	0.037

Standard errors in parentheses.  
 \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

increase support and beliefs about policy efficacy, regardless of the direction or presence of partisan cues.

To examine our competing hypotheses about how both partisan cues and clear cause-effect policy information shape public opinion when both are available, we construct and include in the models interaction terms for our variables of party cue direction and clarity of information. To ease interpretation, we present graphs of the marginal effects in [Figure 1](#). The top left



**Figure 1.** Marginal effect of pro- and counter-partisan cues, relative to no partisan cue.

panel of [Figure 1](#) shows the marginal effect of the pro- and counter-attitudinal partisan cue conditions (relative to the no cue condition) when respondents receive unclear (left panel) or clear (right panel) information on policy support. We find that party cue effects are larger in environments where causal narratives are unclear. In the unclear information condition, reading an article where your party supports the bill (relative to receiving no partisan cue) leads to greater policy support and reading that your party opposes the bill leads to greater opposition. Substantively, a pro-partisan cue increased support for the Head Start bill by approximately six percentage points (as the dependent variables are scaled to run from 0 to 1). Likewise, a counter-partisan cue reduced support by roughly the same margin.

These results suggest that, in the presences of unclear or disputed policy information, partisan cues serve an important role as people evaluate certain policies. By contrast, in the clear causal narrative condition, we see a reduction in the effect of partisan cues. Here, in the presence of a clear causal policy narrative, we find that party cues from one's preferred party has no influence on their support for Head Start. That is, the marginal effect for a pro-partisan cue is statistically insignificant when there is a clear causal story told about the Head Start program. These results suggest that clear causal policy narratives can reduce the influence of party leaders over public opinion. However, we note that overall the analysis presented a mixed picture regarding this conclusion, as counter-partisan cues still moved partisans towards greater opposition of Head Start even in the context of clear policy information.

The bottom left panel of [Figure 1](#) presents the same graphs for Head Start effectiveness. Here, while the counter-partisan cue did not reduce beliefs about effectiveness relative to the no cue condition, pro-partisan cues did increase beliefs about the efficacy of Head Start *in the unclear condition*. Again, the substantive effect is around a seven percentage point increase in perceived policy effectiveness. We again see this effect attenuated in the clear condition, suggesting that clear policy information can, in fact, reduce the use of pro-partisan cues. Yet the same pattern holds for counter-partisan cues, with clear information exhibiting an additive effect, but not an interactive effect.

Readers may note that the nature of the unclear information in the first experiment derives from a lack of data and "inconclusive" results. However, this is just one way in which the clarity of causal narratives may vary. A second way in which information may be unclear is via conflicting findings (e.g. some studies support one conclusion, other studies support an alternative conclusion). In the second study, we examine whether our results from the first study extend to this different way of conceptualizing uncertainty about policy outcomes, and we examine our hypotheses on a second policy area of increasing relevance to American politics: reforming education standards.

## **Education reform experiment**

The second experiment concerned support for national education standards in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) fields. Fielded in February 2015 using MTurk, we collected 1,200 responses to our survey. Our effective sample comprises the 936 respondents who reported a partisan identity. Like the previous study, our second study skewed Democratic (61%) and liberal (58%). Similarly, the average age was 32, 82% of the sample was white, and 92% of the sample had attended some college. The modal income category was higher than the previous study, at \$60,000–\$75,000. Unlike previous MTurk studies, gender was heavily skewed male, with 66% of the sample identifying as male. The experimental protocol followed a similar procedure to the first experiment. Respondents took a brief pre-treatment survey with demographic and political variables and were then randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions (clear vs. unclear information x no partisan cue vs. Republican support cue vs. Democratic support cue) and saw a short article about new education standards. The article length was only four paragraphs long, making the experimental article shorter than the nine-paragraph article used in study one. We manipulate clarity in this experiment by introducing conflict among the analysts who examine educational reform. In the *clear information condition*, respondents read that,

Some non-partisan analysts found that the new standards **produced greater success** among college students in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) programs. Similarly, another group of non-partisan experts found the standards **were critical** for students to meet the demands of the new American economy and changing workforce.

In the *unclear information condition*, respondents read that,

Some non-partisan analysts found that the new standards **produced greater success** among college students in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) programs. Another group of non-partisan experts, however, say the **standards are unnecessary and hurt learning**, with students failing to meet the demands of the new American economy and changing workforce.

As with the first experiment, we also manipulated partisan cues. Following the article, respondents saw a similar set of manipulation reinforcement questions and answered policy support questions about education reform. We replicate the analyses from the first experiment, using the same modeling strategy. Policy support and evaluations of its effectiveness are regressed on a dummy variable for the clear or unclear condition and a series of dummy variables for the party cue conditions. To evaluate our second hypothesis, we add the interactions of these variables. We do not include controls for other predictors of education reforms standards, as our experimental treatments are

**Table 2.** Education reform policy.

	Education reform support	Education reform effective	Education reform support	Education reform effective
Pro-partisan cue	0.07*** (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.09** (0.03)	-0.00 (0.02)
Counter-partisan cue	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.05*** (0.02)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.05** (0.02)
Clear information	0.12*** (0.02)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.15*** (0.04)	0.04* (0.02)
Pro-partisan × clear information	-	-	-0.04 (0.05)	0.00 (0.03)
Counter-partisan × clear information	-	-	-0.03 (0.05)	0.01 (0.03)
Constant	0.52*** (0.02)	0.48*** (0.01)	0.51*** (0.02)	0.48*** (0.02)
<i>N</i>	933	935	933	935
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.052	0.024	0.053	0.024

Standard errors in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

fully randomized.<sup>6</sup> We again analyze two dependent variables, policy support (measured with branched questions, the first being “Based on what you read and what you now know, do you support or oppose the proposed legislation that sets common educational standards for K-12 students?” and, based on whether the respondent supported or opposed the standards, the follow up question “Do you strongly or not so strongly [support/oppose] the proposed legislation to set educational standards?”) and beliefs about the efficacy of the proposed education reforms (measured with the question “How effective do you believe the common educational standards for K-12 students are at preparing students for success during and after college?” with a five-point response set ranging from “extremely effective” to “not effective at all”). Results from these models appear in [Table 2](#).

[Table 2](#) again demonstrates the power of clear information to increase support and efficacy evaluations of policies. When looking at support for education reform, the coefficient for clear policy information is over 40% larger than the comparable coefficient for the pro-partisan cue. When looking at beliefs about the effectiveness of education reform, we see that the effect of clear information is substantively equivalent to the effect of counter-partisan cues, while there is no direct effect for the pro-partisan cue. Once again, this provides support for our first hypothesis that clear information is a powerful tool of political persuasion. In short, we find that both clear information and party cues affect public opinion formation. These findings thus run counter to skeptics who argue that providing respondents with information as a means of political persuasion is “futile” (Caplan 2007; Kahan and

<sup>6</sup>Results are robust when controlling for: party ID, ideology, age, sex, race/ethnicity, income, education.

Braman 2006). As before, the effect of clear information holds even for those individuals receiving counter-partisan cues, with significant effects for both support ( $\beta = 0.12, p < 0.01$ ) and effectiveness ( $\beta = 0.05, p < 0.03$ ).

Unlike the mixed results from the first experiment, however, we see consistent evidence in this study that the influence of clear information is simply additive, not interactive (as evident in the insignificant interaction terms in models 3 and 4 of Table 2). The pattern of results depicted in the right-side panel of Figure 1 is indicative of the pattern seen with the first experiment, with respondents who received the pro-partisan support cue being more supportive of educational reform than those in the no cue condition, yet when comparing between the clear and unclear conditions, the influence of the partisan cues does not change significantly.

The bottom right panel of Figure 1 shows the effect of pro and counter-partisan cues on beliefs about the effectiveness of education reform. Here we see continued evidence that the effect of clear information is additive. While counter-partisan cues do decrease beliefs about the efficacy of educational reform relative to the no cue condition when information is unclear, increasing the clarity of the information does not reduce the influence of this partisan cue.

In sum, across two different studies, with different issue areas and different ways of presenting ambiguous causal policy narratives, we find consistent support for our first hypothesis: *clear* causal policy narratives increase policy support and beliefs about the efficacy of the policy more than unclear causal policy narratives. In addition, in the first experiment, the presence of this clear policy information reduced the influence of pro-partisan cues on policy support. These results demonstrate the importance of considering the clarity of the link between a proposed policy and desired outcomes as a condition that is independently persuasive and can potentially weaken the influence of party leaders. When voters receive information that draws an easily understood path from policy enactment to a preferred result, they react not by counter-arguing and retrenchment to partisan beliefs (at least not always), but rather by evaluating the information and supporting the proposed changes. In some cases, they even use this additional information and reduce their reliance on pro-partisan cues. Yet even in the cases when the effect of partisan cues is not attenuated, the power of clear information remains strong. Voters appear well equipped to incorporate information about proposed legislation, provided the information they receive provides a clear link between said legislation and a societal outcome.

### ***Heterogeneous knowledge and partisanship tests***

Finally, we conduct a series of tests to understand whether these effects are isolated to highly knowledgeable or strongly partisan individuals or if the

effects are consistent across individuals. Previous research shows that both knowledge and partisanship may moderate both party cues and policy information (e.g. Barber and Pope 2019; Lodge and Taber 2013). However, much of the prior research involves highly polarized issues, and here we deal with less salient issues without strong party cues. This is an important distinction, as the effect of new information is likely to differ with the salience of the issue. We present our tests in Table 3.

The top panel of Table 3 presents the results broken down by high and low political knowledge. The effect of clear information is significant in all eight models, while the effect of pro-partisan and counter-partisan information is only significant in two models each. Comparing across the models, the difference in clear information effect sizes between high and low levels of political knowledge is only significantly different in the case of education reform policy support ( $z = 2.14$ ). Thus, while the coefficients are, on average, larger for high knowledge voters than low knowledge voters, there is no consistent pattern demonstrating a stronger influence of clear information for high or low knowledge voters. We note that, when we test the interaction between knowledge, clear information, and partisan cues formally with a three-way interaction (not shown), no significant interactions emerge.

The bottom panel of Table 3 displays the results broken down by weak and strong partisanship. Again, clear information exerts a consistent effect on evaluations. Pro-partisan cues are a significant predictor for only one model while counter-partisan cues are significant in three models. Importantly, these significant effects are not clustered with weak or strong partisans, as two emerge for strong partisans and two for weak partisans. In contrast, clear information is a significant predictor in seven of the eight models broken down by partisan strength. As with political knowledge, clear information does not appear consistently more influential for either strong or weak partisans. The only significant difference between coefficients emerges for Head Start policy support ( $z = 1.69$ ). All other coefficient differences are not statistically distinguishable from zero. As before, when we test the interactions formally with a three-way interaction, no significant results emerge.

## Conclusion

Can the public overcome partisan loyalties and rely instead on substantive facts and evidence when forming political opinions? This paper sheds light on this question by highlighting the importance of causal policy narratives in public opinion formation. In line with Arnold's (1992) expectations, clear causal policy narratives appear to be quite persuasive. The effects of this information mirror and even at times surpass the effects of partisan cues, long considered the "prime mover" of the public's belief systems (e.g. Campbell et al. 1960). When people are told a convincing story linking a policy instrument

**Table 3.** Policy endorsement by knowledge and partisanship.

	Head start		Education reform		Head start		Education reform	
	Support	Effective	Support	Effective	Support	Effective	Support	Effective
	Low Knowledge				High Knowledge			
Pro-partisan cue	-0.00 (0.04)	0.01 (0.03)	0.08** (0.04)	0.01 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.06* (0.03)	-0.01 (0.02)
Counter-partisan cue	-0.05 (0.04)	0.00 (0.03)	0.00 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.06* (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.05 (0.03)	-0.07*** (0.02)
Clear information	0.06** (0.03)	0.06** (0.03)	0.08*** (0.03)	0.04** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.03)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.16*** (0.03)	0.05*** (0.02)
	Weak Partisans				Strong Partisans			
Pro-partisan cue	0.00 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.14*** (0.05)	0.02 (0.03)	0.06 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)	0.00 (0.07)	0.02 (0.05)
Counter-partisan cue	-0.06* (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.05)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.05 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)	-0.17** (0.06)	-0.12*** (0.05)
Clear information	0.06** (0.03)	0.05* (0.03)	0.15*** (0.04)	0.07*** (0.03)	0.14*** (0.04)	0.11*** (0.04)	0.13** (0.05)	0.06 (0.04)

Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

with a desirable end-state, support for that policy instrument rises notably *even* in a context where partisan cues direct people to oppose that policy. Importantly, these results are not constrained to those who lack strong partisan priors or are highly politically knowledgeable. Thus, our results are not driven by a hyper-vigilant subset of the population; instead, when given clear information, members of the public become significantly more supportive of policies than when policy information has unclear outcomes.

Yet the presence of clear causal policy narratives does not eliminate the influence of party leaders. While clear causal information consistently increases support for policies, the instances when it can attenuate the influence of partisan cues are limited, at best. In line with research on partisan motivated reasoning, many people appear capable of reasoning their way towards the opinion of the partisan cues even though the information should push their attitudes in the opposite direction. Thus, clear causal policy narratives – while persuasive in its own right and in line with the additive model – is not a panacea for reducing partisan conflict over policy solutions.

We should caution that our findings also speak to the challenges of communicating policy information. When conflicting findings emerge about the consequences of a policy instrument or when others feel challenged by or lose out from some policy and choose to denigrate its efficacy, our findings suggest that most people will revert to relying on partisan cues. Nonetheless, and without discounting the real challenges behind the communication of policy analysis that may limit the ability of the public to receive clear and accurate causal policy narratives, the findings in this paper still represent an important theoretical advance and suggest communication strategies for media organizations and others who desire a public that can connect its outcome-preferences to the right policy tools.

We would be remiss if we did not note the relatively limited application to the education system in our experiments. While we have no reason to suspect that these results are unique to education policy, future research should consider how clear causal information can be used to reduce partisan cue-taking in other domains. As we discuss, it is possible that some beliefs that are more entrenched in partisanship, or for which there is less bipartisan consensus about desirable end-states, will be difficult to correct with clear causal policy narratives.

Theoretically, our findings indicate that policy information can be an important factor in how people form opinions about public policy. In the presence of clear information connecting a policy instrument to a desirable end-state, the public becomes more supportive of that policy instrument. Through this intervention, the public appears more capable than many assume of making informed and competent political opinions.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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