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Clearer Cues, More Consistent Voters: A Benefit of Elite Polarization

Matthew S. Levendusky

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Abstract Scholars typically argue that elite polarization has only negative consequences for American politics. I challenge this view by demonstrating that elite polarization, by clarifying where the parties stand on the issues of the day, causes ordinary voters to adopt more consistent attitudes. Scholars have made such claims in the past, but because only observational data has been available, demonstrating a cause-and-effect relationship has proven to be difficult. I use original experiments to verify that there is a small but significant causal link between elite polarization and voter consistency. These findings have important normative implications for our understanding of the consequences of elite polarization, the role of political parties in a modern democracy, and the standards scholars use to assess citizen competence and participation.

Keywords Elite polarization · Attitude consistency · Experiment

As elites¹ have become steadily more polarized over the past few decades across a host of issues, scholars and popular commentators alike have decried the deleterious consequences for American politics (see, e.g., Eilperin 2006; Fiorina et al. 2006; McCarty et al. 2006; Brownstein 2007). But is there a benefit to elite polarization, an area where its effects are positive rather than negative? This paper argues that elite polarization enhances American politics by increasing attitude consistency in

¹ Throughout the paper, when I speak of elites, I follow Lee's 2002 definition: elites are elected officials who have some control over policy (see also Zaller 1992). Functionally, elites are what Fiorina et al. (2006) label the "political class."

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the mass public—when elites polarize, ordinary voters will hold attitudes that are more tightly connected to one another.

Consistent attitudes are normatively desirable for the role they play in democratic representation (Converse 1964). If citizens' attitudes are inconsistent and orthogonal to one another, then this raises the troubling specter of citizens not having any genuine attitudes at all (though see, *inter alios*, Lane 1962; Luttbeg 1968; Weisberg and Rusk 1970). If this is the case, what are representatives supposed to represent? Scholars have long debated whether elite polarization does in fact increase voter consistency (contrast, for example, Nie and Andersen 1974; Bishop et al. 1978; Layman and Carsey 2002; Gelman 2008). While both sides of this debate have made important contributions to knowledge, all of this literature suffers from a common limitation—they use over-time variation in elite polarization to estimate the effect of polarization on attitude consistency. Unfortunately, changes in elite polarization are correlated with other developments that can also affect mass consistency. For example, while elites have become more polarized in recent years, they have also changed how they link issues to one another, how they frame key debates, and so forth. As a result, with only over-time data, one cannot conclude that elite polarization—and not some other factor—is the causal factor driving increases in consistency. To actually determine if cause and effect relationships exist, a new type of data is needed.

This paper takes a first step toward verifying causal claims by designing and analyzing original experimental data. My results demonstrate that there is a small but significant causal effect of elite polarization on mass consistency. While more work remains to be done on this point, these results lay the groundwork for future analyses exploring this phenomenon in more detail.

My results also offer a new perspective on the consequences of elite polarization. In contrast to almost all previous work, I identify a positive effect of elite polarization: elite polarization increases mass consistency. The findings here also speak to broader concerns about the study of cue taking, the role parties play in shaping mass behavior, and the standards scholars use to assess voters.

Consistency Since Converse

Public opinion scholars have long been skeptical of the abilities of ordinary Americans to achieve even a modicum of coherence in their political attitudes. Early work suggested that citizens had only a tenuous grasp of political debates, and few if any citizens had even a basic level of attitude consistency (Lippmann 1942; Schumpeter 1942). Any hope that the mass public would live up to the normative standard of an active and engaged polity was crushed by Converse (1964). He demonstrated that ordinary Americans' attitudes—except for a thin stratum of the well-informed—were not connected to one another, even when the issues in question were closely related.²

² Converse focused on voters' ideologies, not on attitude consistency. But if citizens possess ideologies, they will necessarily possess consistent attitudes.

Scholars soon challenged this grim picture of the electorate, arguing that Converse's findings were an artifact of the quiescent 1950s. Faced with the more turbulent and engaging politics of the 1960s and 1970s—Vietnam, the civil rights revolution, urban unrest, and so forth—ordinary voters achieved a higher level of coherence (see, among others, Field and Anderson 1969; Nie et al. 1979). Critics soon challenged these findings, however, arguing that any observed increases were due to changes in question wording, not elite politics (Bishop et al. 1978; Sullivan et al. 1978). This criticism largely signaled the end of this line of inquiry for several decades, as scholars turned their attention to other mechanisms for increasing consistency (e.g., core values, question framing, group-centrism, see Kinder 2003).

The claim that elite activity can increase mass consistency has resurfaced in recent years, however, in response to sustained levels of elite polarization. Elites have divided not simply over high-profile issues like abortion and racial issues, but this division extends to even less salient issues like logging in the national forests and tort reform. In response to this wide-spread elite division, attitudes in the mass public have increasingly become more tightly connected to one another (Layman and Carsey 2002). Some have even gone so far as to argue that a large segment of the electorate now has highly coherent attitudes across a host of issues (Abramowitz 2007).³ These claims have been challenged, however, by other scholars who argue that any recent increases in consistency have been extremely limited (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Gelman 2008).⁴

Regardless of where one stands on this debate, both sides suffer from a common limitation—all of the evidence about the polarization/consistency linkage comes from over-time observational data. While useful for many tasks, this sort of data is typically ill-suited to detecting causal relationships. That is particularly true here, because changes in elite polarization are almost certainly correlated with other changes in elite behavior. As elites change their ideological positions (e.g., as they polarize), they can also change how they frame issues, how they link issues together, and what issues they emphasize in their rhetoric. So if mass consistency has increased over the past generation, how can one separate the effect of elite polarization from these other factors? With existing data, it is exceedingly difficult. While one can conclude that elite polarization and attitude consistency are correlated (as elite polarization increases, so does attitude consistency), establishing a causal link is almost impossible. To establish cause-and-effect relationships, scholars need to identify exogenous shifts in elite polarization uncontaminated by other elite-level changes. Barring a natural experiment, observational data can rarely satisfy that requirement. As a result, prior scholarship only offers limited insight into the cause-and-effect relationship between elite polarization and mass consistency.

³ Comparisons between the U.S. and Europe also support this argument. European elites are more ideologically distinct than their American counterparts, and as a result, European voters hold more consistent attitudes (Niemi and Westholm 1984; Fuchs and Klingemann 1990).

⁴ Others argue that declining response rates give the illusion of increasing consistency (Converse 2006). The mass public is not any more consistent than they were fifty years ago, but the reluctance of low-information voters to speak to interviewers makes the public appear to be more consistent.

An example will help to illustrate this point. A generation ago, issues of poverty and redistribution were distinct from issues of race. But beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, media and political elites began to fuse these two issues together. As a result, issues of redistribution came to be seen through the lens of race, and attitudes toward redistribution are now connected to attitudes about race (Gilens 1999; Kellstedt 2003). At the same time, the parties have remained highly polarized on both issues of race and issues of redistribution. If consistency has increased between racial and redistributive issues, what part of the increase is due to the change in the portrayal of poverty, and what part is due to increasing levels of elite polarization? The answer is unclear.

This same problem plagues other comparisons as well. Changes in the salience of issues over time, issues entering or leaving the public agenda, or a host of other changes could all possibly alter attitude consistency. Given that one could never control for all of these competing factors, over-time evidence is limited in what it can say about causal effects in this instance. In contrast, experimental work is nicely suited to speaking directly to this causal question. While experiments cannot address the over-time question, they can speak to concerns about the actual mechanism driving increases in consistency. Experimental studies therefore serve as an important complement to (rather than a replacement for) existing observational studies. But before I introduce my experimental design, I need to explain the causal mechanism in more detail.

Elite Polarization and Cue Clarity

Cue taking provides the underlying logic connecting elite polarization and mass consistency. It is well-known that ordinary voters must rely on elites to make sense of the political world (Zaller 1992). Polarization impacts the cue-taking process because it changes the clarity of the cues elites send to voters in two ways: it increases the ideological distance between the parties, and it also increases the ideological homogeneity within each party.

To see how these factors shape cue taking, imagine a voter in a world with moderate (unpolarized) elites. Both elite parties contain liberals and conservatives, and on average, the parties' positions are relatively similar to one another. Imagine the complex task a voter faces in this world when trying to decide how to adopt his party's position on the issues. Different factions within his own party advance different positions, and both parties (on average) take a similar stance on the issue. In such circumstances, ordinary voters will struggle to follow their party's cues. As a specific example, imagine a voter trying to decide how to adopt his party's position on abortion in the early 1970s. Both parties took centrist positions on average, but contained large numbers of both pro-life and pro-choice members (Adams 1997). What was the Democratic or Republican position on abortion? The answer was not terribly clear. This same process holds more generally: with moderate, unpolarized elites, cue taking is a difficult task.

But when elites are polarized, cue taking becomes much simpler. When elites are polarized, they send voters clearer signals about where they stand on the issues of the

day: the parties' positions are distinct from one another, and each party is more internally ideologically homogeneous. In this environment, it is easier for an ordinary voter to follow his party's cue, since it will be clearer that Democrats are on the left and Republicans are on the right.⁵ To return to the earlier abortion example, by the late 1990s, elite Democrats were largely pro-choice, their Republican counterparts largely pro-life, and the overlap between the parties on this issue was limited. In this environment, it is relatively straightforward for voters to adopt their party's position on abortion, and by the same logic, on a host of other issues as well. When elites are polarized, more voters will adopt their party's position on the issues.

As voters follow these party cues on multiple issues, they begin to hold more consistent attitudes. So when a Republican voter follows his party's elites and adopts pro-life and pro-tax cut positions, his attitudes are not only consistent with his partisanship, they are also consistent with one another. Mass consistency increases simply as a result of more distinctive party cues, which help voters figure out "what goes with what," even in the absence of any explicit cross-issue linkages. Elite polarization, by clarifying where the parties stand on the issues of the day, increases cue taking, which increases mass consistency.⁶

There are three important limitations of this theory, however. First, note that my definition of consistency is somewhat more limited than Converse's 1964 classic definition. For Converse, consistency is the extent of agreement between a voter's issue positions and his/her liberal-conservative self-identification: if I am a liberal, to what extent do I embrace liberal issue positions (Converse 1964)? I focus, in contrast, on the role of party cue taking in generating consistency. I do so because I have an explicit theoretical mechanism linking it to elite polarization. I leave it as a separate theoretical and empirical question for future work whether or not elite polarization increases internal consistency (in the sense meant by Converse) as well. This unfortunately means that my claims will be somewhat more limited in scope than many previous analyses. Nevertheless, my theory still captures a key component of what scholars mean by "consistency:" to what extent are citizens' attitudes related to one another? If I know what position someone takes on one issue, can I predict their position on another (Nie and Andersen 1974)?⁷ My theory speaks directly to these concerns via the mechanism of cue taking, and as such, fits squarely within the broader tradition of studying mass consistency.

Second, my results can only establish that consistency has increased; they cannot show that constraint has increased. Increased consistency simply requires connecting positions across issues: if you take a liberal position on gun control, then you should take a liberal position on (say) abortion. Increased constraint, on the other hand, requires understanding *why* these issues are connected (Luskin 1987; Bennett

⁵ This theory assumes that as elite polarization increases, more voters will be able to correctly identify where elites stand on the issues of the day. For evidence supporting this assumption, see Hetherington (2001) and Levendusky (2009).

⁶ Although these examples come from high-salience issues, the same mechanism works on low-salience issues as well. The limitation, however, is that voters are less likely to know where elites stand on these more obscure issues.

⁷ As in many earlier studies (e.g., Converse 1964), I define consistency along a single left-right dimension.

2006; see Converse 1975, page 101 for a discussion of how consistency can increase without a parallel increase in constraint). This paper addresses the issue of consistency, I leave constraint for other work.

Finally, my theory treats some individuals as “inconsistent” though their attitudes might be logically consistent according to some metrics. Imagine that a Democratic voter took consistently conservative positions on a set of issues. I would not call this person “consistent” in my framework because his positions are at odds with those taken by his party elites, but his positions might be logically consistent with one another. I acknowledge this is a limitation given that some voters may organize their beliefs in other ways (Lane 1962; Peffley and Hurwitz 1985). However, this is unlikely to be a particularly serious limitation here given that the issues used in this study all tend to map onto the contemporary left-right ideological divide (see, e.g., McCarty et al. 2006).

An Experimental Test

In order to test the relationship between elite polarization and mass consistency, I need to experimentally manipulate subjects’ perceptions of elite polarization. If I can manipulate these perceptions, and this in turn changes their level of consistency, then this will provide me with cause-and-effect evidence that elite polarization increases voter consistency.

I designed a three-condition, between-subjects experiment to test my theory. Subjects were asked for their opinion on a series of policy issues. For each issue, all subjects were given a brief background paragraph describing the issue. What subjects then saw varied by treatment condition (treatment assignment was held constant across issues for all subjects).⁸ Subjects assigned to the control condition saw no additional information, and were simply asked for their opinion on the issue. Subjects in the two treatment conditions, however, were given information about elite positions before being asked for their opinion. Subjects were provided with the positions of members of Congress on these same issues (subjects were told that the information came from a scientific study of members of Congress conducted by an official government agency, see Appendix for more details). The assumption here is that the positions of members of Congress represent the positions of the national parties as a whole. Given the high visibility of members of Congress, this is a reasonable assumption employed by previous scholars (Carmines and Stimson 1989; McCarty et al. 2006).

The two treatment conditions (where subjects are given information about elite positions) depict elites as either moderate or polarized. An example of the elite positions shown to voters appears below in Fig. 1; the top panel depicts the polarized elites condition, the lower panel depicts the moderate elites condition.⁹

⁸ As a randomization check, a joint test of statistical significance reveals treatment assignment is not predictable based on demographic characteristics, ideology, and partisanship ($\chi^2 = 19, p = 0.78$).

⁹ These figures have been edited slightly for publication. For screenshots of the actual prompts seen by survey respondents, see the supplemental materials available at the author’s website [www.sas.upenn.edu/~mleven].

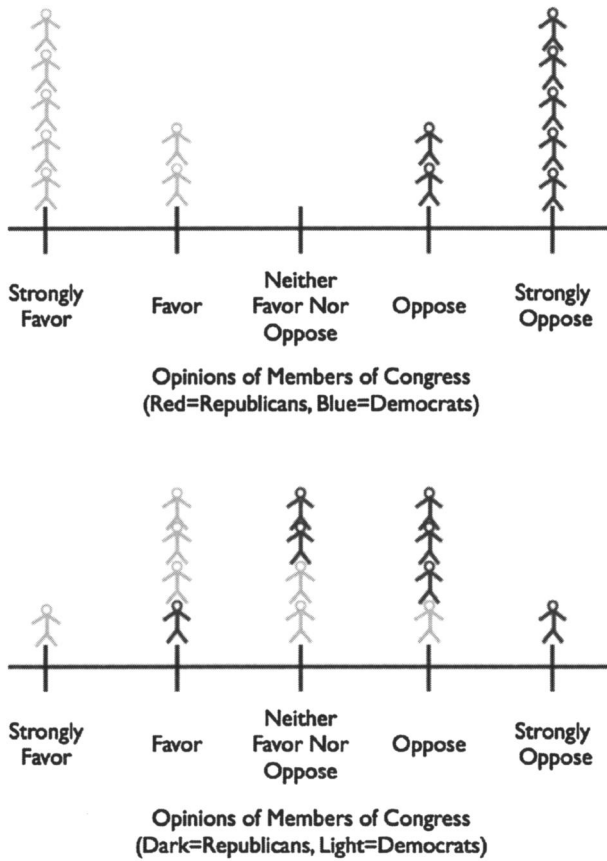


Fig. 1 Distributions of elites positions shown to respondents in the polarized elites condition (*top panel*) and the moderate elites condition (*bottom panel*)

The only difference between the moderate and polarized elites conditions in Fig. 1 is the degree of elite polarization. Consistent with the above theoretical discussion, polarization has two components: the ideological distance between the parties, and the ideological homogeneity of each party. In the polarized elites condition, the parties are both ideologically distinct from one another and relatively internally ideologically homogeneous (e.g., Democrats are liberals, Republicans are conservatives, and there is essentially no overlap between the two). Elites in this polarized elites condition mimic the elites of the 1990s and 2000s. In the moderate elites condition, elites look more like they did in the 1960s and 1970s. The parties are more heterogeneous (e.g., some Democrats are conservative, some Republicans are liberal), and the parties’ positions are less ideologically distinct from one another. Comparing subjects’ behavior in these two conditions will allow me to draw inferences about the effect of elite polarization on citizens’ attitudes.

In an ideal experiment, I would have manipulated each component of polarization (the distance between the parties and the homogeneity of each party) separately; sample size constraints prevented me from doing so here. This is not,

however, as detrimental as it might appear: the extant literature does not provide hypotheses about the independent effects of the two dimensions of polarization on voters, they simply group both under “polarization” and examine their combined effect. I follow the standard practice in the literature and do the same, recognizing that this introduces a limitation to the current study. However, this provides an exciting opportunity for future work: scholars can manipulate extremity and homogeneity separately and examine their independent effects.

One important aspect to note about these manipulations is that they are purposefully designed to be rather weak. Comparing the two panels in Fig. 1 reveals that there are only minor differences between the two conditions. This ensures that if I find evidence of an effect on voters, it is not simply the result of unrealistically strong manipulations. But this in turn has an important implication—the differences between respondents’ attitudes across conditions should be small (in light of the weak cues). This is a scenario where even weak effects represent an important finding (Prentice and Miller 1992). Future work will be needed to see exactly how different levels of elite polarization effect voters, but the setup in my experiments makes it likely (though not certain) that any real-world effects will be larger than those I detect here.

Further, note that while my study resembles previous cue-taking studies, it departs from existing work in a critical respect. Both the moderate and polarized elite conditions in Fig. 1 cue voters to take the same side of the issue; the difference between the two treatment conditions is the extremity and homogeneity of that cue. Standard cue-taking experiments vary a different set of factors. They either assess the effect of a cue on attitudes, or they assess the effect of the direction of the cue (e.g., the effect of saying “the Democrats support X” versus “the Republicans support X,” for details see, e.g., Rahn 1993). My experiment, however, does neither of these things, as it holds the direction and presence of the party cue constant and varies the polarization of the cue. If citizens who are randomly assigned to the high and low elite polarization conditions behave differently, then I will have shown that the degree of elite polarization affects cue taking even holding the presence and direction of the party cue constant.

For my experiment to be successful, I need to manipulate respondents’ perceptions of elite polarization (and then examine whether these different perceptions of polarization affect consistency). I included a manipulation check in my survey instrument to assess whether my experimental manipulation changed respondents’ beliefs about elite polarization. At the end of my experiment, I asked respondents to rate the degree of similarity or difference in the positions taken by Democrats and Republicans. If my experiments functioned as intended, then subjects assigned to the polarized elites condition should perceive greater differences between the parties’ positions than subjects in the other two conditions.

A simple one-way ANOVA reveals this is the case ($F(2, 8599) = 9.7, p < 0.01$). While only 24 percent of subjects assigned to the moderate elites conditions thought the parties’ positions were “very different,” 49 percent of subjects in the polarized elites condition felt this way (as did 22 percent of subjects in the control condition). Simply put, voters perceive greater differences between the parties when they are depicted as more polarized. My experiment therefore puts me in a strong position to

test the key substantive hypothesis of interest: when subjects perceive higher levels of elite polarization, do they exhibit higher levels of consistency?

My claim is not, however, that voters in the real world receive the cues depicted in Fig. 1; the cues I give voters are necessarily artificial. The key point is that these cues simulate the empirical phenomenon of interest: when elites are more polarized, voters perceive greater differences between the parties. Though the process is undoubtedly more complicated in the real world, as elite polarization increases, voters do in fact recognize that elites take more distinct positions (Hetherington 2001). My stimuli therefore capture the essence of the real-world phenomenon of interest: when voters perceive greater elite polarization (for whatever reason, or by whatever means), do they then hold more consistent attitudes?¹⁰

To give the most compelling test possible of my theory, the items used here were selected according to three primary criteria. First, I chose items where I expected subjects to have only weak prior beliefs. This ensures that my experimental manipulation—and not the respondent’s pre-existing opinion—is the key source of information about the issue. This ruled out, for example, high profile issues like the war in Iraq, abortion, gay marriage, and so forth. Second, I also excluded issues that were so obscure that respondents would have no real basis for opinion formation. To that end, I selected my issues from the lists of “key votes” generated by research organizations (e.g., Project Vote Smart, Congressional Quarterly, National Journal, etc.) and interest groups (e.g., the AFL-CIO, Sierra Club, Chamber of Commerce, etc.), thereby ensuring that the issues in the survey are not irrelevant to the larger political debate. Finally, I also eliminated issues that were extremely popular (or unpopular) to avoid any floor or ceiling effects, which ruled out issues like prescription drug importation or outsourcing.

Specifically, I selected five issues for this experiment: (1) whether the Army Corps of Engineers should add more external review of the environmental impact of a project prior to construction, (2) whether air traffic controllers should remain federal government employees or instead be employed by private firms, (3) whether the government should permit further deregulation of the electricity market, (4) whether the government should maintain the ban on coastal drilling for oil and natural gas, and (5) whether the federal or state governments should maintain primary control over job training programs. These issues are obscure enough so that subjects are likely to have weak priors, but still tap into broader political debates about government intervention into the economy, the trade-off between economic growth and environmental protection, and federalism.

One might be tempted to argue that opinion formation on these sorts of less salient issues is inherently uninteresting, but this view is short-sighted. If I had

¹⁰ My design parallels Mutz’s (2005) study of social trust. To study the effects of trust on behavior, she changes subjects’ levels of trust using a story from *Reader’s Digest*. In the real world, many things beyond a simple news story alter trust, but that’s not the issue: because she changes levels of trust, her experiments speak to the ramifications of those changes. The same logic holds here: my manipulations do not exactly mimic the real world, but that is not particularly problematic given that they do shift respondent’s beliefs about elite polarization. For more on the general point about the relationship between realism and external validity, see Carlsmith et al. (1989), Berkowitz and Donnerstein (1982), and Anderson and Bushman (1997).

selected more salient issues (e.g., the war in Iraq, stem-cell research, etc.), then I would be unable to manipulate respondent's beliefs about the parties' positions, and therefore would be unable to test my proposed causal mechanism. Low-salience issues, in contrast, allow a much more straightforward test of my theory.

Further, these less salient issues are important in their own right—they simulate opinion formation on a new issue as it rises to prominence on the political agenda, when ordinary voters do not yet know where they—or even elites—stand on the issue.¹¹ My experimental results clarify how attitudes become consistent on emerging issues just entering the political agenda. For more crystallized and familiar issues, I would not expect to find an ongoing pattern of these types of elite effects. So, for example, the results here speak to how elites' positions would have affected voters attitudes on, say, abortion when elites were becoming polarized on the issue during the 1980s.

This distinction brings up an important design point: if I want to estimate the effect of elites on mass opinion, much of that effect is concentrated in the early stages of issue emergence. For more crystallized issues, the impact of elites has already been absorbed into citizens' attitudes, so trying to detect these elite effects will be all but impossible. Studying novel issues is therefore essential to isolating the effects of elite behavior on voters' attitudes. The logic of this design directly parallels Bartels's 1993 arguments about media effects: to understand the role of the media, we need to look at new issues where that effect can actually be isolated. This does introduce a limitation to my results, however, and future work can explore how issues of differing salience affect the polarization-consistency linkage. But my results are crucial as a baseline to see if an elite effect exists in a low-salience environment.

I embedded these experiments in a survey administered via Knowledge Networks in November 2007. Knowledge Networks is a leading Internet survey firm with a unique twist. Most Internet samples suffer from a serious design flaw: because the respondents consist of volunteer panelists and not a random sample of households, the conclusions from a particular sample do not necessarily generalize to the larger U.S. population. Knowledge Networks, however, recruits panelists via RDD telephone methods and then administers the surveys online through a webTV unit given to panelists. The Knowledge Networks data are therefore a random sample of American households, and my conclusions will generalize to the general U.S. population. The quality of data from Knowledge Networks samples compares favorably to standard RDD telephone samples (Krosnick and Chang 2001), and data from Knowledge Networks has been widely used throughout political science (see, among many others, Huber and Lapinski 2006; Jackman and Hillygus 2003; Clinton 2006).

Given that my hypotheses concern how partisans will react to their party's positions, my sample includes only partisans (including leaners); I exclude pure independents since I do not have any theoretical expectation as to how they will behave. This introduces a limitation to the generalizability of the results below: the

¹¹ Alternatively, they could also simulate a situation where elites switch positions on an issue, and subjects need to learn anew how party maps onto the issue.

population from which my sample is drawn is individuals who identify with a political party, rather than the population at large.

Experimental Results

The first step in my causal chain is that elite polarization increases cue taking. If this is the case, then I should find that in the polarized elite condition more respondents follow their party's cues than in the other two conditions. But what constitutes cue taking in my experiments? One of the key differences across experimental conditions is the location of the modal elite. In the polarized elites condition, the modal elite “strongly favors/opposes,” the policy, whereas in the moderate elites condition he only “favors/opposes” the policy (see Fig. 1). In keeping with my cue taking theory, I expect the mass public's attitudes to reflect this difference—there should be more respondents “strongly favoring/opposing” in the polarized elites condition. One might be tempted to pool respondents who “strongly favor” the policy with those who only “favor” it and simply look at respondents who are on the correct “side” of the issue. While that may be a useful test in many circumstances (e.g., Fiorina and Levendusky 2006), it is not the correct test here: because subjects in both the polarized and moderate elite conditions are told elites favor/oppose the issue, there may not necessarily be much difference between conditions along this dimension. The right test here is the one that mimics the difference between the elite cues, which is whether subjects select the “strongly favor/oppose” options. I therefore say that a respondent follows his party cues if he strongly favors/opposes the policy (depending upon his partisanship).

Table 1 analyzes the data to determine whether the highest levels of cue taking occur in the polarized elites condition.

Table 1 provides strong evidence that cue taking does vary by experimental condition.¹² Here, the dependent variable is whether or not a respondent follows his party's cue on each of the five issues (so the analysis in Table 1 has five observations for each of 1763 respondents, hence the need for subject random effects and issue fixed effects).¹³ If my theory is correct, then I should find higher levels of cue taking in the polarized elites condition than the moderate elites condition. That translates to finding a statistically significant “polarization condition” coefficient, as the effect is measured relative to the baseline moderate elites condition. I find such an effect here: voters are four to five percent more likely to follow party cues in the polarized elites condition relative to the moderate elites baseline (analyzing the data using ANOVA yields similar substantive conclusions). This provides strong support for the first step in my causal chain: as elites take more polarized positions, voters are more likely to follow their party's cues.

¹² I pool across issues in the interest of simplicity. I have also re-estimated the results separately by issue and the substantive results remain the same.

¹³ Here, I use fixed/random effects to control for any un-modeled issue- or person-specific variation (see, more generally, Wooldridge 2000).

Table 1 Logistic regression predicting cue taking as a function of treatment assignment, issue-specific fixed effects, and subject-specific random effects

Note: Coefficients that are statistically distinguishable from zero ($\alpha = 0.10$ level, two-tailed) are given in bold

Variable	Estimate
Intercept	0.15 (0.01)
Control condition	0.007 (0.01)
Polarized elites condition	0.05 (0.01)
Includes issue fixed effects	
Includes subject random effects	
<i>N</i>	8815

The next step is to examine whether this cue taking leads to increases in consistency. I examine consistency by examining pairs of issues. Here, with five issues, there are ten possible pairs of issues. For each pair of issues, I code a respondent as consistent if he adopts his party's position on both issues (where taking your party's position is defined in the same way as in the analysis of Table 1). So, for example, consider the coastal drilling-job training issue pair. A Democrat (Republican) takes consistent positions on this pair of issues if he "strongly favors" (strongly opposes) maintaining the ban on coastal drilling and "strongly opposes" (strongly favors) giving state government primary control of job training programs. If, by contrast, he did not take his party's position on one or both issues, however, then he would not be coded as consistent for this pair of issues. This operationalization of consistency follows from the theoretical discussion above: since elite polarization drives cue taking, which in turn drives consistency, consistency is cue taking on multiple issues.

For each respondent, then, I have whether or not they take consistent positions on each of ten issues. I again pool across issues, and predict consistency on each pair of issues as a function of treatment assignment (and the issue fixed effects and subject random effects). Table 2 gives the results.

Table 2 again reveals strong support for my theory that consistency varies by experimental condition. Here, subjects assigned to the polarized elites condition have the highest levels of attitude consistency, and that level of consistency is statistically significantly different from the moderate elites condition. Relative to the moderate elites condition, subjects assigned to the polarized elites treatment have a 31 percent (relative) gain in consistency. Similarly, the average correlation between issue positions is higher for subjects assigned to the polarized elites condition as well (0.36 for the polarized elites condition, 0.29 for the moderate elites condition, and 0.30 for the control condition). Note that this is not simply a party cue effect: there are statistically significant differences in consistency between the moderate and polarized elite conditions, but subjects receive a party cue in both conditions. Rather it is the degree of elite polarization that drives these results. More polarized elites lead to more consistent voters.

One might also ask whether this finding of increased consistency extends to a broad section of the electorate, or rather is simply limited to some small subset of voters. Perhaps the most obvious moderator variable is strength of partisanship. One would expect that the effect would be larger for strong partisans, given that they have the strongest attachment to the parties (Miller and Shanks 1996). But is there

Table 2 Logistic regression predicting consistency as a function of treatment assignment, issue-specific fixed effects, and subject-specific random effects

Variable	Estimate
Intercept	-5.16 (0.21)
Control condition	0.05 (0.23)
Polarized elites condition	0.63 (0.22)
Includes issue fixed effects	
Includes subject random effects	
N	17615

Note: Coefficients that are statistically distinguishable from zero ($\alpha = 0.10$ level, two-tailed) are given in bold

any effect for weak or leaning partisans? Table 3 replicates Table 2, but estimates separate effects for strong versus weak/leaning partisans.

Table 3 reports the results of a variable slopes/intercepts model (where strong partisans and weak/leaning partisans have slopes and intercepts estimated separately). The results demonstrate that the effect is not simply limited to those with the strongest ties to the party, but rather extends to all respondents (e.g., the main effect of “polarized elites condition” is statistically distinguishable from 0, indicating that weak/leaning partisans assigned to the polarized elites condition are more likely to hold consistent attitudes than weak/leaning partisans assigned to the moderate elites condition). Partisans of all stripes respond to the degree of elite polarization in the parties’ cues.

Although the effects in Tables 2 and 3 are relatively small, they still represent an important finding for two reasons. First, they are the only causal (rather than simply correlational) findings on this point in the literature. While prior correlational findings may be larger, they suffer from the limitation that one cannot typically isolate the specific causal effect of polarization itself net of other changes in the political environment. As such, knowing that elite polarization has a statistically significant, albeit small, effect on voter consistency is an important finding.

Second, the experimental manipulations in this study are relatively weak treatments (see the discussion above). I specifically designed the experiments so that they would manipulate subjects’ perceptions of polarization without making the point too obvious. The only difference between the polarized and moderate cues is the placement of a few elites, and differentiating between them requires paying

Table 3 Replication of Table 2, with separate slopes and intercepts estimated for strong partisans

Variable	Estimate
Intercept	-5.58 (0.25)
Strong partisan	1.43 (0.33)
Control condition	0.40 (0.27)
Polarized elites condition	0.59 (0.28)
Strong partisan * control condition	-1.04 (0.46)
Strong partisan * polarized elites condition	0.09 (0.44)
Includes issue fixed effects	
Includes subject random effects	
N	17615

Note: Coefficients that are statistically distinguishable from zero ($\alpha = 0.10$ level, two-tailed) are given in bold

fairly close attention to the distribution of elites. This is far more than is typically asked of subjects in standard experiments, and perhaps one should be surprised that the experiments here worked at all. In the real world, however, parties are not subtle about announcing their positions: they do so loudly and clearly and repeatedly over time. Even mildly attentive voters learn the parties now take more distinctive positions than they did a generation ago. Without the burden of subtlety, the real-world effects of elite polarization are likely to be larger than in my experiment (though this is a topic for future research). Regardless of the specific effect size, however, any finding of a cause and effect relationship, even a very small one, is a contribution to knowledge.

Conclusion and Implications

This paper argues that elite polarization generates increased mass consistency by a two-step process. First, more polarized elites, by generating clear cues for voters, increases cue taking. But as subjects follow their party cues on these issues, they not only align their positions with their party, but they also align their positions with one another. This effect occurs as a result of elite polarization, and occurs even for those without strong ties to the parties. The fact that elites are polarized across issues is enough to cue voters to adopt more consistent positions.

Of course, like all experimental work, my results are necessarily limited, and more experimentation is needed on several fronts to extend these results. Four avenues for future work readily suggest themselves. First, more experiments are needed to unpack the independent effects of the two components of elite polarization: ideological homogeneity within each party and ideological differentiation between the parties. While there are no hypotheses about their independent effects in the extant literature, this is an opportunity to advance the debate over the effects of polarization both theoretically and empirically. Next, though I excluded them from my sample here, another future topic is to consider how independents react to changes in elite polarization. While there is no clear theoretical expectation, it would be interesting to study how voters without any party ties respond to changes in elite polarization. Third, these experiments have elites giving a single message about where they stand. But in the real world, elites repeat their policy positions day after day, year after year. What is the effect of this repetition? I would hypothesize that it generates a cumulative effect, where even subtle cues can have large effects over time as subjects hear them again and again. Finally, does the type of issue affect the size of treatment? For example, one might hypothesize that the treatment effect would be smaller for more obviously ideological issues (e.g., tax cuts), since voters are less likely to need the party positions to know where they should stand. I would expect that it will take a much stronger cue to alter voters' attitudes on these issues, unlike the less familiar issues I considered here. My data cannot really speak to these concerns, but future experimentation will allow scholars to more fully specify how elite positions shape mass attitudes.

These are all real and noteworthy limitations. However, despite these shortcomings, the findings here represent the first evidence of a causal linkage between elite

polarization and consistency (via party cue taking). More work remains to be done, but this is an important first step.

These findings have several broader implications beyond this polarization-consistency linkage; I highlight three particularly important ones here. First, there are important implications for studies of cue taking. Scholars have studied the effects of party cues for a generation, and we have learned a great deal about how party cues operate generally (Rahn 1993; Cohen 2003), and how individual differences shape who responds to cues (Kam 2005). These are useful studies, but they suffer from two important limitations. First, they only explore whether the presence or absence of a cue matters (e.g., does the party signal its position or not?). Second, while these studies have much to say about how citizens' characteristics (such as strength of partisanship, sophistication, core values, etc.) affect cue taking, they do not tell us how changes at the elite level affect cue taking. My study makes an important advance on both fronts. I demonstrate that voters do not simply respond to the presence or absence of a cue, but rather are more sophisticated consumers of party messages. This work moves beyond existing efforts by demonstrating a theoretical mechanism that connect elites' strategic choices to voters' behavior. These findings presents scholars with exciting opportunities to explore how changes at the elite level filter down to impact ordinary voters' attitudes and behaviors.

Second, I demonstrate that elite polarization can have positive effects (for a related argument, see Hetherington 2008).¹⁴ While elite polarization has negative consequences as previous scholars argued, this work highlights its potential benefits. With more distinctive elites, citizens hold more consistent attitudes, which is important in and of itself. Additionally, these more consistent positions may also increase the percentage of citizens who vote correctly (Lau and Redlawsk 1997). Given that elites typically espouse consistent positions, subjects who themselves hold consistent attitudes should be more likely to vote correctly. Increasing the proportion of citizens who vote correctly is an important step towards a healthier democracy: if elections are supposed to signal the intentions of voters to elites, then increasing correct voting should improve the quality of our democracy (Lau et al. 2008). So elite polarization, by increasing voter consistency, has positive consequences for the health of American democracy.

Today's parties give voters clear choices—exactly what scholars have been asking “responsible” parties to do for fifty years (Committee on Political Parties 1950; Wattenberg 1998; Burnham 1982). Before scholars decry the negative effects of polarized elites, they should take into account the positive role these parties have on the electorate. It is somewhat ironic that no sooner did parties become more “responsible” than scholars began to decry that shift (Rae 2007). My point is not to suggest that these electoral effects outweigh other pernicious effects of elite polarization. Rather, it is simply to demonstrate that the balance sheet for elite polarization is less lopsided than prior scholarship has argued.

At the same time, a more pessimistic reader could use my results to say that this conclusion is too Panglossian: this increase in consistency is due to citizens

¹⁴ While some authors argue elite polarization may have some positive effects (e.g., Sinclair 2006; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008), most have been more skeptical.

following their party elites. Consistency is therefore more about the power of party cues than the presence of ideological thinking in the electorate (e.g., Jacoby 1995). Further, this reliance on party also opens the door to elite manipulations of mass behavior, a troubling implication to say the least (Achen and Bartels 2006; Converse 2006). From this perspective, perhaps any increases in mass consistency are not such a positive development after all.

These competing claims about the implications of mass consistency indicate that one of two things is true: either this sort of increased consistency is a social “good,” or scholars have the wrong standards for citizens. Helping voters make better electoral choices and improving the ability of elections to signal voters’ preferences are unambiguously good news, and demonstrate that elite polarization improves the quality of the electorate. Alternatively, if one wants to argue that the reliance on party cues (and the specter of manipulation) outweighs these benefits, then scholars have the wrong standards for citizens. Parties are what connect people to the political world, so it should not be surprising that they govern people’s political choices (Muirhead 2006; Sniderman and Levendusky 2007). Party-based reasoning may not be ideal, but it may be all that citizens can achieve. We should abandon unrealistic standards for citizens and instead try to understand the world of the possible, not just the world of the ideal (see also Bartels 2003). Hopefully this research helps us to move toward that goal.

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Appendix

Survey Items

This appendix gives additional details on the survey items administered. Knowledge Networks fielded the survey during November 2007 (from 12 November until 19 November). A total of 2,557 respondents were invited to participate in the poll, with 1,763 completed responses for a completion rate of 69%.

The survey asked respondents for their opinion on five issues: adding additional external review of the environmental impact to Army Corps of Engineers Projects, whether the federal government or private companies should maintain control of air traffic controllers, whether the federal government should lift the ban on coastal drilling, whether rules permitting deregulation of electricity markets should be enacted, and whether the federal government of state governments should have the primary responsibility for job training programs. The original source of each issue (e.g., the interest group that scored each key vote) is available from the author upon request.

As I discussed in the body of the paper, all of these issues come from the lists of “key votes” generated by interest groups and various politically focused media

outlets (e.g., National Journal). As such, all of these issues are ones where a well-informed respondent could identify the parties' positions without much additional information, again helping to ensure that any effects of the treatment are not simply functions of giving respondents totally obscure issues. So these issues strike a nice balance between being salient enough to be selected by key interest groups and still tap into fundamental debates in American politics (e.g., the amount of government intervention into the economy, balancing economic development versus environmental protection, balancing federal versus state control), yet are low salience enough to allow me to actually test my theory.

List of Survey Questions

Introductory Text

Please read about each issue

[IF MODERATE OR POLARIZED CONDITIONS: and study the positions of the two parties. After you've had a chance to study the positions of the parties, then move onto the next screen to register your own opinion on each issue.

For each policy, we will tell you where members of Congress from both parties stand. The data comes from a scientific study conducted by the Congressional Research Center for the official Congressional Record. The opinions of Democrats are shown with blue stick-people and Republicans are shown with red stick-people. Each symbol you see on the screen symbolizes 25 members of Congress, so the more symbols by a position, the more members of Congress agree with a position.]

[IF CONTROL: and then use the scale to tell us what you think about this issue.

Army Corps of Engineers: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is a federal government agency that develops the nation's waterways. For example, the Corps helps to design most of the nation's dams and flood control projects. Recently, some have argued that more independent review of Corps projects by outside engineers is needed to protect environmentally sensitive areas. Critics disagree, and argue that these reviews add unnecessary costs and slow down development too much.

How about you? Do you agree or disagree that more independent review of Corps projects is needed?

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Air Traffic Controllers: Air traffic controllers are currently employees of the U.S. government. Some people have proposed allowing private firms, rather than the federal government, to be in charge of air traffic controllers.

How about you? Do you agree or disagree with allowing private companies to control air traffic controllers?

Coastal Drilling: Drilling for oil and natural gas is currently prohibited along most areas of the U.S. coastline. Some people have proposed eliminating this

restriction, which would result in more exploration for oil and natural gas along the U.S. coast.

How about you? Do you agree or disagree with maintaining the ban on coastal drilling?

Job Training Programs: The federal government currently has the primary responsibility for developing and carrying out many types of job-training programs. Some people have argued that the federal government should instead allow state governments to have primary control over these job-training programs.

How about you? Do you agree or disagree with giving state governments primary control over job-training programs?

Electricity Deregulation: The rates power companies charge consumers for electricity are currently regulated by state and federal laws. Some people want to eliminate these laws and allow market forces to set the price of electricity.

How about you? Do you agree or disagree with eliminating government regulation of electricity rates?

A few moments ago, we asked you about your attitude on a series of recent policy issues. Now we'd like to ask about how similar the views of Democratic and Republican members of Congress are on those issues.

What about the issue of whether states or the federal government should have the primary responsibility for job-training programs?

Do Democrats and Republicans in Congress take very [SIMILAR/DIFFERENT] views on this issue, somewhat [SIMILAR/DIFFERENT] views, somewhat [DIFFERENT/SIMILAR] views or very [DIFFERENT/SIMILAR] views?

Very similar views

Somewhat similar views

Somewhat different views

Very different views

What about adding additional external review to Army Corps of Engineers Projects ?

What about maintaining the ban on coastal drilling for oil and natural gas?

What about removing the government regulations on the price of electricity?

What about whether the federal government or private companies should maintain control of air traffic controllers?

A few moments ago, we asked you for your opinion on five different issues. Now we'd like to know how familiar you are with the debate surrounding each of these issues.

With which issue are you most familiar?

Federal vs. Private Control of Air Traffic Controllers

Removing Government Regulation of Energy Prices

Maintaining the Ban on Coastal Drilling for Oil and Natural Gas

Adding Additional External Review to Army Corps of Engineer Projects

Federal vs. State Control of Job Training Programs

With which issue are you second most familiar?

With which issue are you third most familiar?

With which issue are you fourth most familiar?

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