Informing the Electorate? How Party Cues and Policy Information Affect Public Opinion about Initiatives

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Citizens in representative democracies receive party endorsements and policy information when choosing candidates or making policy decisions via the initiative process. What effects do these sources of information have on public opinion? We address this important question by conducting survey experiments where citizens express opinions about initiatives in a real-world electoral context. We manipulate whether they receive party cues, policy information, both, or neither type of information. We find that citizens do not simply ignore policy information when they are also exposed to party cues. Rather, citizens respond by shifting their opinions away from their party's positions when policy information provides a compelling reason for doing so. These results challenge the prominent claim in public opinion research that citizens blindly follow their party when also exposed to policy information. They also suggest that efforts to inform the electorate can influence opinions, provided that citizens actually receive the information being disseminated.

Each election cycle, candidates, political parties, interest groups, and others spend vast sums attempting to influence citizens' opinions about politics. This occurs not only when citizens choose representatives to make decisions on their behalf but also when they directly make policy decisions via the initiative process. Indeed, due to the salience of many ballot propositions and because initiatives are difficult to undo once passed, elite efforts to influence citizens are substantial. Between 2000 and 2009, 15 groups in California spent nearly $660 million on state and local ballot measures—an amount that exceeds the money these groups donated directly to political candidates and party committees and spent lobbying the state legislature combined (California Fair Political Practices Commission 2010). In addition to spending by interest groups, political parties attempt to influence citizens by publicizing their positions on initiatives, while nonpartisan and "good government" organizations try to educate the public about the likely consequences of passing particular initiatives.

What effect do signals from political parties (i.e., party cues) and policy information have on public opinion? The answer to this question is of great interest to those who seek to understand the relative influence of these types of information. It is also of particular concern in direct democracy settings, where citizens themselves make consequential policy decisions. Proponents believe the initiative process results in policies that better reflect citizens' preferences (for a discussion, see Bowler, Donovan, and Tolbert 1998; Lupia and Matsusaka 2004). However, if citizens ignore or are unable to use policy information about the likely consequences of passing particular initiatives, it is not clear how the initiative process will result in policies that better reflect their preferences. Similarly, if citizens blindly follow party cues irrespective of policy information, then they have, in effect, abdicated their responsibility for making policy decisions.

Our study examines the relative influence of party cues and policy information by exposing citizens to political parties' actual positions on policy issues under active consideration, as well as real policy information about

those issues. Specifically, we conduct survey experiments in which respondents express opinions about the initiatives on the 2010 California general election ballot. We randomly assign respondents to receive either the Democratic and Republican parties' official positions, policy information about the likely consequences of passing each initiative, both party cues and policy information, or neither. By using real party cues and policy information and by including a control group in which neither is provided, we overcome two limitations of previous experiments on this topic. First, previous experiments typically use fictional candidates and/or policy information, which limits our understanding of how citizens respond to policy information that has real implications for them. Second, previous experiments typically use factorial research designs that omit a "no information" control group, which limits our ability to evaluate competing theories of how party cues and policy information interact.[1]

Our results challenge a prominent claim in public opinion research that citizens ignore policy information when they are also exposed to party cues. We find instead that when respondents receive policy information that conflicts with their own party's positions on the initiatives, the policy information counteracts the effects of party cues, resulting in opinions that are no different from the control group. This pattern is most pronounced among politically knowledgeable and strongly partisan respondents. It is also most pronounced on policy issues where respondents lack strong prior attitudes. However, when respondents receive policy information that reinforces their own party's positions, party cues and policy information substitute for one another. Together, these results indicate that the traditional view of partisans blindly following their party's positions needs revising. Indeed, partisans shift their opinions away from their party's positions when policy information provides a compelling reason for doing so.

Party Cues versus Policy Information

A prominent claim in public opinion research is that when citizens are exposed to both party cues and policy information, they attend to the easier-to-use party cues and ignore policy information (Cohen 2003; Popkin 1991; Rahn 1993; Zaller 1992). The theoretical basis for this claim stems from dual-process models of attitude change (Eagly and Chaiken 1993; Petty and Cacioppo 1996). These models suggest that people use simple decision rules and cues when they lack the motivation or ability to process information systematically. Given that most citizens lack knowledge of and interest in politics (Campbell et al. 1960; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), party cues have traditionally been thought to have greater effects on citizens' opinions than policy information.[2]

Despite the theoretical basis for the claim that party cues outweigh policy information, the empirical evidence is weak. As Bullock (2011) notes, research designs that systematically manipulate both party cues and policy information are rare. The few that do manipulate both reach different conclusions. For example, several studies show that citizens ignore policy information when party cues are present (Cohen 2003; Rahn 1993; Riggle et al. 1992). However, others find that policy information influences citizens even when party cues are present and that its effects can be equally large (Arceneaux 2008; Bullock 2011; Nicholson 2011; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010).

What explains such conflicting conclusions? Part of the explanation stems from particular features of the experiments used in these studies. Experiments showing that citizens ignore policy information when also exposed to party cues use fictional candidates and/or policy information. Thus, subjects receive information about policies and candidates that they know will not affect them. This stacks the deck in favor of party cues having a greater effect than policy information, as there is little reason to expect subjects to be motivated to process policy information systematically when it is not real and has no consequences for them.

Studies showing that policy information affects citizens' opinions even when party cues are present also use fictional candidates and/or policy information. However, the nature of the policy information often stacks the deck in favor of subjects responding to it (Arceneaux 2008; Bullock 2011). This is because subjects receive counterstereotypical policy information on a salient issue (e.g., a Republican candidate taking a pro-choice position). In Bullock (2011), subjects also receive a large amount of policy information (16 paragraphs). These characteristics of the policy information (counterstereotypical and detailed) are factors thought to prompt systematic processing (Chaiken and Maheswaran 1994; Petty and Cacioppo 1986). However, these conditions are unlikely to characterize many political contexts, where citizens receive smaller amounts of policy information whose partisan implications are unclear.

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[1] These limitations are similar to those of early framing studies that used only one frame or omitted a control group.

[2] Kruglanski and Thompson (1999) criticize dual-process models, suggesting that cues are not necessarily less complex than messages.

Another limitation of previous experiments is their use of factorial research designs that omit a control group in which neither party cues nor policy information is provided. By omitting this "no information" baseline, these research designs limit our ability to evaluate competing theories about how party cues and policy information interact. For example, the theory of motivated reasoning predicts that certain types of citizens will react to policy information in a biased way when party cues are present (Taber and Lodge 2006). Detecting such bias, however, requires a comparison of whether party cues and policy information together have an effect that is different from the sum of their individual effects (relative to the control group). A control group can also reveal whether policy information completely cancels out or merely dampens the effect of party cues.

Our study contributes to existing research on party cues and policy information in three important ways. First, we not only expose respondents to party cues and/or policy information, but we also include a control group in which respondents receive neither. Second, we provide policy information that is concrete and detailed, but not counterstereotypical or more substantial than citizens commonly receive. Third, we use actual party positions and real policy information about real issues during a campaign where outcomes are consequential.[3] In so doing, we clarify whether, when, and how party cues and policy information influence opinions.

Survey Design

The 2010 California general election provides an excellent opportunity to test the relative effects of party cues and policy information in a real-world context. In that election, there were nine initiatives on the ballot that addressed a variety of policy issues, from social issues like legalizing marijuana to fiscal issues like a tax loophole for big businesses. The Democratic and Republican parties took opposing positions on nearly all of these initiatives. Many nonpartisan groups also sought to provide citizens with policy information about the likely consequences of passing each initiative. We take advantage of the variety of issues, party positions, and policy information to assess

competing claims about how policy information affects citizens' opinions.

In the survey experiment, all respondents receive short descriptions of these initiatives presented in random order. Respondents randomly assigned to the control group receive only these descriptions, while respondents assigned to the treatment groups also receive either the political parties' positions, policy information about the initiatives, or both party cues and policy information. The outcome of interest is whether and to what extent respondents support particular initiatives. By examining this outcome, we can assess whether political parties' endorsements induce respondents to toe the party line, as well as whether policy information changes their opinions.

In the control group, respondents are asked to express their opinions in the neutral manner used in the American National Election Study to elicit "real" opinions. These questions provide a baseline measure of respondents' opinions on each initiative. For example, on Proposition 25, control group respondents read the following:

> This November, Californians will be asked to vote on Proposition 25, which proposes to lower the legislative vote requirement to pass a budget from two-thirds to a simple majority, while retaining the two-thirds vote requirement for raising taxes. Some people support lowering the legislative vote requirement to pass a budget from two-thirds to a simple majority. Other people believe that the legislative vote requirement to pass a budget should remain at two-thirds.

Respondents are then asked whether they strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose Proposition 25. Respondents can also respond, "don't know." The passages for the other initiatives are structured similarly. (See the online supporting information for each passage.)

In the "party cue" treatment group, respondents receive the official positions of the Democratic and Republican parties on each initiative, as opposed to the positions of "some people" and "other people." For example, on Proposition 25, respondents read that the Democratic Party supports lowering the legislative vote requirement to pass a budget and that the Republican Party believes that the vote requirement should remain at two-thirds. The passages for the other initiatives similarly link the parties to their official positions.[4]

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[3]This enhances external validity and avoids deception. A potential concern is the possibility of "pretreatment" from the campaign (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007). Although the policy information likely reached only the most attentive citizens, the parties' positions were widely publicized. If anything, this should make it more difficult to observe treatment effects.

[4]The parties took different positions on every initiative except Propositions 19 and 22, where one party took no official

In the "policy information" treatment group, respondents receive information that clarifies the consequences of passing each initiative. This policy information is based on actual arguments that were made at the time and, in many instances, is drawn from materials produced by the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst Office (which estimates the fiscal impact of particular initiatives). For example, on Proposition 25, respondents in this treatment group receive the same description of the initiative as respondents in the control group, but they also read the following:

> Last year, California issued 450,000 IOUs to small businesses, state workers, and others doing business with the state because it was unable to pass a budget on time. These IOUs cost taxpayers more than 8 million dollars in interest payments.

In this example, the policy information conveys that passing Proposition 25 (which would make it easier to pass a budget) could reduce California's need to issue IOUs, thereby saving the state millions of dollars. Therefore, the policy information provides a reason for supporting Proposition 25. The policy information for the other initiatives is structured similarly, although we vary whether it provides a reason for supporting, a reason for opposing, or both (and hence is balanced) across the nine initiatives.

In the "party cue + policy information" treatment group, respondents receive *both* the party cues and the policy information provided in the other treatment groups. Hence, respondents receive policy information that not only provides a reason for supporting or opposing an initiative but that also reinforces or conflicts with their own party's positions. For example, Democratic respondents in this treatment group receive reinforcing information on Proposition 25 because the Democratic Party supports this initiative, and the policy information provides a reason for supporting it. However, Republican respondents receive conflicting information because the Republican Party opposes Proposition 25, but they receive the same policy information that provides a reason for supporting it.

This Proposition 25 example illustrates a unique feature of our experimental design: while we randomly assign respondents to control and treatment groups, natural variation in respondents' partisanship and the parties' positions provides an opportunity to analyze the effects of policy information when it reinforces or conflicts with respondents' own party's positions across the initiatives. One consequence of taking advantage of this natural vari-

ation is that the initiatives on which Democratic respondents receive reinforcing or conflicting signals from their party and the policy information are different from the initiatives on which Republican respondents receive reinforcing or conflicting signals (e.g., Democrats receive reinforcing signals on Proposition 25, while Republicans receive conflicting signals). The reason for this is twofold. First, the Democratic and Republican parties took opposing positions on nearly all of the initiatives. Second, Democratic and Republican respondents receive the exact same policy information on each initiative.[5] As a result, whether the policy information reinforces or conflicts with each party's position varies across the initiatives for Democratic and Republican respondents. In our analysis, we examine the effects of receiving reinforcing, conflicting, or balanced information in the "party cue + policy information" treatment, relative to the other treatment and control groups *on the exact same initiatives.*

Hypotheses

We now make predictions about how party cues and/or policy information will affect opinions. When presented separately, we expect respondents' opinions to shift in the direction suggested by their own party's positions or the policy information. When presented together, existing research makes competing predictions about their relative effects. These predictions are summarized in Table 1 and described below.

Separate Effects

In the "party cue" treatment group, we expect that respondents will be more likely to support initiatives that their party supports and oppose initiatives that their party opposes, relative to the control group. This prediction stems from research emphasizing that parties' brand names provide voters with simple, credible signals about particular issues (Popkin 1991; Sniderman and Bullock 2004).[6]

In the "policy information" treatment group, we expect that policy information that provides a reason for

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position. On these initiatives, respondents in the "party cue" treatment group receive the issue position of the party that officially took a position and the opposing issue position of "other people." Our conclusions are the same if we exclude these initiatives.

[5]Alternatively, we could have randomly assigned Democrats and Republicans to receive different policy information on each initiative, thereby ensuring that they receive reinforcing or conflicting signals on the same initiatives. With nine initiatives and only 1,000 respondents, this was infeasible. It also would require pretests to ensure that the different policy information on each initiative was equally strong.

[6]In our experiments, movement toward the in-party versus away from the out-party is observationally equivalent. Nicholson (2012) finds that out-party cues can be more powerful.

TABLE 1 **Hypotheses and Results**

Treatment	Theory	Prediction	Observed?
Party cues	Partisan Consistency	Opinion change in the direction of own party's position	Yes
Policy information	Framing	Opinion change in the direction of the policy information	Yes
Party + Policy	Dual Process	No opinion change, relative to "party cue" treatment	No
	Policy Matters	Opinion change, relative to "party cue" treatment	Yes
	Motivated Reasoning	Politically knowledgeable and strongly partisan citizens should:	
		Respond more favorably to reinforcing info	No
		Respond more favorably to neutral info	No
		Ignore or discount conflicting info	No
	Prior Attitudes	Strong priors: Little to no opinion change, relative to control and "party cue" treatment	Yes
		Weak priors: Opinion change, relative to control and "party cue" treatment	Yes

supporting (opposing) particular initiatives will increase (decrease) support for those initiatives, relative to the control group. Policy information that provides both types of reasons (i.e., balanced) should not change the extent to which respondents support particular initiatives, relative to the control group. These predictions stem from framing research, which demonstrates that highlighting positive (negative) aspects of policies increases (decreases) support for them (Druckman 2001). Framing research also shows that competing policy considerations tend to cancel each other out, resulting in no opinion change (Chong and Druckman 2007).

We also expect the effects of policy information to be weaker than the effects of party cues for two reasons. First, the policy information is more complex and its implications are less clear. Second, because there is no source attributed to the policy information, respondents may perceive it as less credible than the party cues (Boudreau 2009; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998).

Combined Effects

In the "party cue + policy information" treatment group, we test the competing predictions that existing theories make about the relative influence of party cues and policy information. On the one hand, *dual-process models predict that when citizens are exposed to both party cues and policy information, they will ignore policy information and rely on the easier-to-use party cues.* If this is the case,

then we should observe similar levels of support in the corresponding "party cue" and "party cue + policy information" treatment groups. On the other hand, *if policy information influences opinions even when party cues are present, then we should observe different levels of support in the "party cue" and "party cue + policy information" treatment groups.*

Still other theories suggest that the effects of party cues and policy information will depend upon the type of citizen or nature of the policy issue. *The theory of motivated reasoning predicts that citizens who are motivated to protect their prior beliefs (strong partisans) or have the ability to counterargue opposing information (politically knowledgeable citizens) should exhibit biased responses to policy information, particularly when party cues are present* (Lavine, Borgida, and Sullivan 2000; Taber and Lodge 2006). This theory posits that these citizens interpret new information as consistent with their existing views, regardless of whether this interpretation is accurate (Kunda 1999; Lodge and Taber 2000). If this is the case, then strong partisans and politically knowledgeable respondents should respond more favorably to balanced policy information, discount or ignore policy information that conflicts with their party's positions, and respond even more favorably to policy information that reinforces their party's positions, particularly when party cues are present.

With respect to how the nature of the policy issue should affect responses to party cues and policy information, *research suggests that opinion change is more likely on*

issues where citizens have weak prior attitudes (Chong and Druckman 2010; Druckman and Leeper 2012a). Thus, we expect to observe greater effects for policy information on initiatives where citizens have weak prior attitudes.

Methods

Our survey experiment was administered by YouGov from October 15 to 25, 2010, approximately two weeks before the election. YouGov is a survey research service that recruits samples of adults via the Internet. The 1,000 Californians who participated were drawn from the YouGov panel, which is opt-in. The respondents were matched on gender, age, race, education, party identification, ideology, and political interest. Our results use unweighted data, but are similar when weighted based on known marginals for California's population (see the supporting information).

Our sample resembles California's population in several respects, including gender, age, and family income. As with most opt-in Internet samples, our sample is more highly educated. Specifically, our sample includes a smaller percentage of respondents with no high school diploma than the state's population (4% versus 18.5%) and a larger percentage of respondents with some college (40.2% versus 29.1%). These sample characteristics likely contribute to the high rate of correct answers on our political knowledge questions (see the supporting information).

The implications of our sample's nonrepresentativeness on education and political knowledge nonetheless cut both ways. While some studies suggest that politically knowledgeable citizens are more responsive to policy considerations (Arceneaux 2008; Kam 2005), Bullock (2011) shows that citizens with low levels of education are more responsive. Further, the theory of motivated reasoning predicts that politically knowledgeable citizens will be the most biased in their reaction to policy information (Taber and Lodge 2006). These are relevant considerations when assessing the generalizability of our results. When evaluating our main effects, however, it is worth noting that neither education nor political knowledge is correlated with respondents' assignment to treatment and control groups (see the supporting information).

When testing our hypotheses, we analyze the extent to which respondents support particular sets of initiatives in the control and treatment groups. The dependent variable, *Support*, is a dummy variable that reflects whether each respondent expresses support for an initiative. Thus,

the unit of analysis is respondent-initiative observations.[7] This variable is coded as 1 for respondents who "strongly support" or "somewhat support" and 0 for respondents who "somewhat oppose" or "strongly oppose" each initiative.[8]

To examine how party cues and policy information affect support for the initiatives, we create independent variables that reflect the nature of the signal that Democratic and Republican respondents receive on each initiative.[9] These independent variables divide the initiatives into three categories for each treatment and control group.[10] In the first category (*Reinforce*), respondents' own party and the policy information make the same recommendation about whether to support or oppose an initiative (e.g., Proposition 25 for Democrats). In the second category (*Conflict*), respondents' own party and the policy information make different recommendations about whether to support or oppose an initiative (e.g., Proposition 25 for Republicans). In the third category (*Balanced*), respondents' own party makes a recommendation about whether to support or oppose an initiative, but the policy information is balanced. The specific initiatives in each category for Democratic and Republican respondents are listed in the supporting information.

For each of these three categories, we create four independent variables that reflect participation in a treatment or control group on that subset of initiatives. This ensures that we compare respondents' opinions in the treatment and control groups *on the exact same initiatives*. For example, the independent variables *Reinforce_Party*, *Reinforce_Policy*, *Reinforce_Party_Policy*, and *Reinforce_Control* reflect participation in the "party cue," "policy information," "party cue + policy information," or control group on initiatives where respondents' own

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[7]We use clustered standard errors because the errors are independent across respondents, but not necessarily within respondents across the initiatives.

[8]"Don't knows" or nonresponses for each initiative are omitted.

[9]We code respondents who identify as "strong," "not very strong," or "lean" Democrat or Republican as Democrats and Republicans. We omit Independents and those who fail to answer.

[10]Before pooling initiatives, we examined them individually. The effects of party cues and policy information are consistent with our predictions across all nine initiatives, though there are differences in magnitude and significance. The individual initiative results are in the supporting information and indicate that our combined results are not driven by only one or two initiatives. We exclude Proposition 24 from our model because, as we discuss in the supporting information, the policy information confused respondents. We also exclude Republican respondents on Proposition 22, as they did not receive a directional signal (their party did not take a position, and the policy information is balanced).

party and the policy information make the same recommendation. We create similar independent variables for the *Conflict* and *Balanced* categories. Because each treatment and control group is included as an independent variable, we omit a constant term. We then regress the dependent variable, *Support*, on these predictors, which yields the following model:

$$Support = \beta \, Reinforce\_Party + \beta \, Reinforce\_Policy$$
$$+ \beta \, Reinforce\_Party\_Policy + \beta \, Reinforce\_Control$$
$$+ \beta \, Balanced\_Party + \beta \, Balanced\_Policy$$
$$+ \beta \, Balanced\_Party\_Policy + \beta \, Balanced\_Control$$
$$+ \beta \, Conflict\_Party + \beta \, Conflict\_Policy$$
$$+ \beta \, Conflict\_Party\_Policy + \beta \, Conflict\_Control$$
$$+ \epsilon$$

Each independent variable is coded to reflect the direction of the recommendation respondents receive from their party and/or the policy information for the initiatives in each category.[11] For example, *Reinforce_Party*, *Reinforce_Policy*, and *Reinforce_Party_Policy* are coded as 1 for initiatives where respondents' own party and the policy information recommend supporting an initiative and −1 for initiatives where respondents' own party and the policy information recommend opposing an initiative. The variable *Reinforce_Control* is coded as 1 for control group respondents on those initiatives where their own party recommends supporting an initiative and −1 on initiatives where their own party recommends opposing them. (See the supporting information for the codings for each initiative.)

The independent variables for the other two categories (*Balanced*, *Conflict*) are coded in the exact same way, with one exception. Specifically, the variable *Conflict_Policy* is coded as −1 for initiatives where the policy information provides a reason for supporting an initiative and 1 for initiatives where the policy information provides a reason for opposing an initiative. We do this to reflect the fact that the policy information for these initiatives provides a recommendation that conflicts with (rather than reinforces) respondents' own party's position. Thus, this variable is coded in the opposite direction of *Conflict_Party*.

The relevant baselines in this analysis are the *_Control* and *_Party* independent variables within each category. For example, if respondents are more likely to support initiatives when their party supports them and oppose initiatives when their party opposes them,

[11]We also estimated our results separately for Democrats and Republicans (see the supporting information). Both react similarly to party cues and policy; thus, we combine them.

then we should observe positive, significant effects for the *Reinforce_Party*, *Balanced_Party*, and *Conflict_Party* variables, relative to *Reinforce_Control*, *Balanced_Control*, and *Conflict_Control*, respectively. If policy information affects respondents' opinions even when party cues are present, then we should observe different effects for the *Reinforce_Party* and *Reinforce_Party_Policy* variables; the *Balanced_Party* and *Balanced_Party_Policy* variables; and the *Conflict_Party* and *Conflict_Party_Policy* variables. To simplify the presentation of our results, we convert the coefficients for these variables in Table 2 to predicted levels of support in Figures 1 and 2. We test our hypotheses by comparing levels of support in our treatment groups to the relevant control and "party cue" baselines within each category of initiatives.

Results

Our results support our predictions about the effects of party cues and policy information, separately, and shed light on how party cues and policy information, together, affect opinions. As expected, respondents shift their opinions in the direction recommended by their party or the policy information when these types of information are presented separately. When presented together, respondents do not ignore policy information. This is especially true of strong partisans and politically knowledgeable respondents and on issues where respondents lack strong prior attitudes. Thus, we find little support for dual-process models and motivated reasoning and show that policy information matters even when party cues are present (see Table 1).

Separate Effects

The results show that when respondents receive party cues, they are more likely to support initiatives that their party supports and oppose initiatives that their party opposes. We observe this effect across all three categories of initiatives. Figure 1(a), for example, shows predicted levels of support for initiatives that a respondent's own party supports, and the policy information provides a reason for supporting. On these initiatives, support is 11% higher among respondents in the "party cue" treatment group than in the control group ($p < 0.05$). The effects of party cues are similar in Figure 1(b), which shows predicted levels of support for initiatives that a respondent's party supports and where the policy information is balanced, and Figure 1(c), which shows predicted levels of support for initiatives that a respondent's party supports and that the policy information provides a reason for opposing.

TABLE 2 Effects of Party Cues and Policy Information on Support for Initiatives

		Political Knowledge		Partisanship	
	All	High	Low	Strong	Weak
Reinforcing information					
Party cue	1.108*	1.285*	0.872*	1.201*	1.081*
	(.107)	(.141)	(.161)	(.203)	(.125)
Policy info	0.807*	0.942*	0.570*	0.970*	0.747*
	(.099)	(.125)	(.162)	(.183)	(.117)
Party + policy	1.133*	1.280*	0.886*	1.183*	1.118*
	(.086)	(.115)	(.125)	(.191)	(.096)
Control	0.614*	0.783*	0.325*	0.510*	0.644*
	(.094)	(.122)	(.149)	(.198)	(.107)
Conflicting information					
Party cue	0.807*	0.938*	0.587*	0.678*	0.853*
	(.123)	(.159)	(.195)	(.230)	(.146)
Policy info	0.333*	0.225*	0.482*	0.305	0.344*
	(.117)	(.165)	(.166)	(.219)	(.139)
Party + policy	0.283*	0.285*	0.279	0.202	0.312*
	(.109)	(.136)	(.184)	(.204)	(.130)
Control	0.475*	0.724*	0.059	0.528*	0.458*
	(.119)	(.149)	(.197)	(.242)	(.137)
Balanced information					
Party cue	0.827*	1.245*	0.341*	0.987*	0.782*
	(.118)	(.171)	(.164)	(.270)	(.131)
Policy info	0.615*	0.675	0.516*	0.564*	0.637*
	(.127)	(.166)	(.197)	(.250)	(.146)
Party + policy	0.684*	0.805*	0.493*	1.321*	0.519*
	(.113)	(.146)	(.180)	(.283)	(.124)
Control	0.436*	0.563*	0.235	0.470	0.427*
	(.124)	(.163)	(.194)	(.259)	(.142)
N	5750	3624	2126	1418	4332
Clusters	844	518	326	210	634
Log pseudolikelihood	−3568.82	−2156.21	−1385.58	−863.36	−2699.92

Note: Numbers are logit coefficients with clustered standard errors in parentheses.
*p < 0.05.

As expected, the effects of policy information depend upon whether it provides a reason for supporting or opposing particular initiatives, or whether it is balanced. As Figure 1(a) shows, support for initiatives that the policy information provides a reason for supporting is 5% higher in the "policy information" treatment group than in the control group (p < 0.05). Figure 1(c) shows that the converse is true for initiatives that the policy information provides a reason for opposing.[12] Figure 1(b) indicates
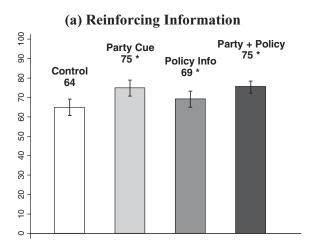
[12]That policy information does not have a significant effect in the Conflicting category (Figure 1c) is not surprising, given that respondents' prior attitudes were strong on several initiatives in this category.

that respondents who receive balanced policy information are not significantly more or less likely to support initiatives than respondents in the control group. These effects are, as predicted, weaker than the effects of party cues.
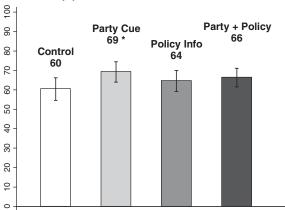
Combined Effects

The results for the "party cue + policy information" treatment group indicate that, contrary to the expectations of dual-process models, respondents do not ignore policy information when party cues are present. As Figure 1(c) shows, when respondents' own party and the
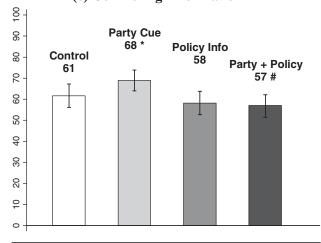
FIGURE 1 Support for Initiatives with Different Types of Information

(a) Reinforcing Information

(b) Balanced Information

(c) Conflicting Information

Note: Bars indicate predicted support from the "All" respondents model in Table 2. The line on each bar shows the 95% confidence interval. ∗ denotes difference with control is significant (p < 0.05, one-tailed); # denotes difference with party cue is significant (p < 0.05, one-tailed).

policy information send conflicting signals about whether to support particular initiatives, they are significantly less likely to support those initiatives than when they receive only party cues. Whereas respondents in the "party cue" treatment group have a 68% chance of supporting these initiatives (significantly higher than the control group), respondents in the "party cue + policy information" treatment group have only a 57% chance of supporting these initiatives (significantly lower than the "party cue" treatment group). Respondents' support for these initiatives in the "party cue + policy information" treatment group is not significantly different from that of control group respondents, who have a 61% chance of supporting these initiatives.

In addition, party cues and policy information appear to substitute for one another when they make the same (i.e., reinforcing) recommendations. As Figure 1(a) shows, respondents are equally likely to support initiatives when their party suggests that they support them and when both their party and the policy information suggest that they support them. Given that party cues and policy information have similar effects when presented separately on these initiatives (both significantly increase support, relative to the control, and the size of these increases is not significantly different), it is not clear whether respondents who are exposed to both types of information ignore the party cues, the policy information, or neither. That said, policy information does not increase support above and beyond the effect of party cues by themselves.
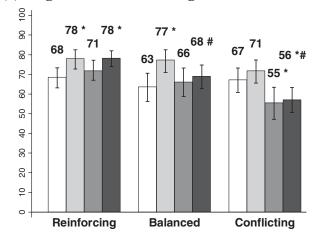
When balanced policy information is provided with party cues, it also does not significantly change respondents' support for initiatives, relative to respondents who receive only party cues. Figure 1(b) shows that there is not a significant difference in respondents' propensity to support an initiative when they receive only party cues and when they receive both party cues and balanced policy information. Given that balanced policy information does not significantly affect respondents' opinions when it is presented by itself, it is not surprising that it also does not significantly affect respondents' opinions when party cues are present.

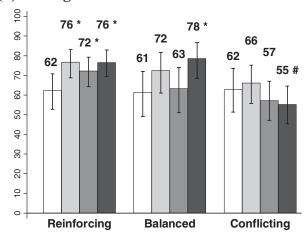## Politically Knowledgeable and Strongly Partisan Respondents

Given that citizens overall do not ignore policy information when party cues are present, we examine whether party cues and policy information interact in particular ways for certain types of respondents. The theory of motivated reasoning, for example, predicts that politically

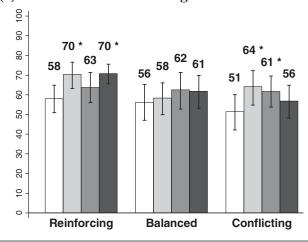**FIGURE 2 Support for Initiatives by Political Knowledge and Strength of Partisanship**
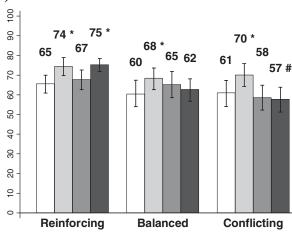
(a) High Political Knowledge

(b) Strong Partisans

(c) Low Political Knowledge

(d) Weak Partisans

Note: Bars indicate predicted support from the "Political Knowledge" and "Partisanship" models in Table 2. White = control; light gray = party cue; dark gray = policy information; black = party + policy. The line on each bar represents the 95% confidence interval. ∗ denotes difference with control is significant ($p < 0.05$, one-tailed); # denotes difference with party cue is significant ($p < 0.05$, one-tailed).

knowledgeable and strongly partisan respondents will re-act to policy information in a biased way when party cues are present. We find, however, that politically knowledge-able and strongly partisan respondents react objectively.[13] Indeed, they are more responsive than other respondents.

This pattern is apparent in comparing the "party cue" and "party cue + policy information" results for each type of signal in Figure 2, which displays predicted support for strongly and weakly partisan and politically knowl-edgeable and unknowledgeable respondents. Figures 2(a)

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[13]We use four fact-based questions about politics to measure politi-cal knowledge. Scores above the median are considered knowledge-able and below the median unknowledgeable (see the supporting information).

and 2(b) show, for example, that when politically knowl-edgeable respondents and strong partisans receive policy information that reinforces their own party's position (i.e., support) in the "party cue + policy information" treatment group, they are no more likely to support the initiatives than when they receive only their party's po-sition. Stated differently, these respondents do not place greater weight on information that reinforces their party's position. Rather, they appear to use party cues and policy information as substitutes, much like respondents overall.

Politically knowledgeable and strongly partisan re-spondents also do not interpret balanced policy infor-mation more favorably when party cues are present. Figure 2(b) shows that there is no significant difference

in strong partisans' propensity to support particular initiatives when they receive only party cues and when they receive both party cues and balanced policy information. That balanced policy information, by itself, also does not significantly affect strong partisans' support for initiatives (relative to the control group) indicates that party cues do not change how strong partisans treat balanced policy information. Figure 2(a) shows that although balanced policy information influences politically knowledgeable respondents' opinions when party cues are present, the effect is to dampen, not strengthen, the effect of party cues. Specifically, when politically knowledgeable respondents receive both party cues and balanced policy information, their support for the initiatives significantly decreases, relative to the "party cue" treatment group.

Finally, politically knowledgeable and strongly partisan respondents do not respond in a biased way when the policy information conflicts with their party's position. Rather, the conflicting policy information cancels out the effects of party cues for these respondents as well. As shown in Figures 2(a) and 2(b), these respondents are significantly less likely to support initiatives when they receive policy information that conflicts with their own party's position (i.e., support) in the "party cue + policy information" treatment group, relative to when they receive only party cues. Further, strong partisans' opinions in the "party cue + policy information" treatment group are not significantly different from those of strong partisans in the control group, while politically knowledgeable respondents are significantly *less* likely to support the initiatives than in the control group. These results indicate that these respondents do not ignore policy information that is counter to their party's position.

Comparing the above results to the results for respondents with low levels of political knowledge reveals that politically knowledgeable and strongly partisan respondents are actually *more* responsive to policy information. Indeed, respondents with low levels of political knowledge do not show as large (or as objective) responses to policy information. As Figure 1(c) shows, these respondents increase their support for initiatives in the "policy information" treatment (relative to the control) when the policy information provides a reason for opposing the initiatives in the "Conflicting" category. When these respondents receive party cues and conflicting policy information, there is not a significant difference in their opinions, relative to when they receive only party cues. These results, while contrary to the theory of motivated reasoning, are consistent with studies showing that politically aware and high-need-for-cognition citizens are most responsive to policy information (Arceneaux 2008; Bullock 2011; Kam 2005).

Prior Attitude Strength

The variety of issues at stake in this election allows us to evaluate whether the effects of party cues and policy information depend upon the nature of the policy issue. Previous research predicts that their effects will be larger on issues where respondents lack strong prior attitudes. This expectation can be tested by comparing initiatives with different levels of salience or media attention. Our results for two initiatives below (and others in the supporting information) demonstrate that policy information's effects are greatest on issues where respondents lack strong prior attitudes.

Consider, for example, Proposition 26, which sought to increase the legislative vote requirement to two-thirds for state levies and charges and require voters to approve new local levies and charges. This esoteric policy issue received far less media attention than other initiatives. While attitude strength has many dimensions, repeated exposure to an issue via the media is thought to promote attitude strength (Chong and Druckman 2011; Druckman and Leeper 2012b). Given the media's lack of attention, it is unlikely that respondents had strong prior attitudes about Proposition 26. The extent of "don't knows" in the control group (19%) supports this claim.

Respondents' weak prior attitudes should make it more likely that they will respond to the policy information that provides a reason for opposing Proposition 26. This is what we observe. As Figures 3(a) and 3(b) show, the policy information significantly increases opposition among Democrats and Republicans (relative to the control group). Moreover, both groups of partisans express significantly different opinions when they receive both party cues and policy information than when they receive only party cues. For example, Figure 3(a) shows that a significantly larger percentage of Democrats oppose Proposition 26 when they receive both their party's position and policy information opposing Proposition 26, relative to Democrats who receive only their party's position opposing this initiative.
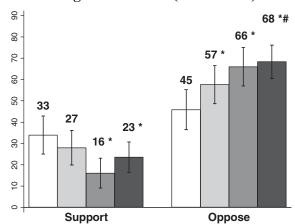
We observe a similarly large response to policy information among Republican respondents in the "party cue + policy information" treatment group. Unlike Democratic respondents, Republican respondents receive conflicting signals from their party (which supports Proposition 26) and the policy information (which provides a reason for opposing Proposition 26). As Figure 3(b) shows, a significantly smaller percentage of Republicans support this initiative in the "party cue + policy information" treatment than in the "party cue" treatment (74% versus 90%). Here, the policy information counteracts the party cues. The results for other initiatives where

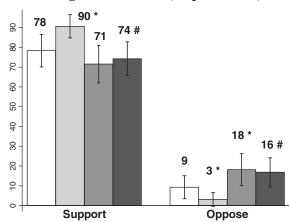FIGURE 3 **Initiatives Involving Weak versus Strong Prior Attitudes**

Weak Prior Attitudes: Prop. 26 (Require 2/3 Vote for Charges and Levies)
Democratic Party: Opposes
Republican Party: Supports
Policy Information: Reason for Opposing

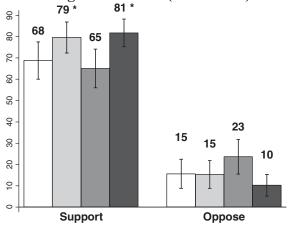**(a) Reinforcing Information (Democrats)**   **(b) Conflicting Information (Republicans)**

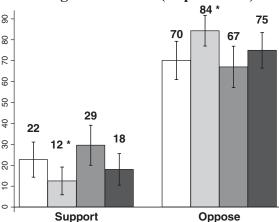**Strong Prior Attitudes: Prop. 25 (Lower Vote Requirement for State Budget)**
Democratic Party: Supports
Republican Party: Opposes
Policy Information: Reason for Supporting

(c) Reinforcing Information (Democrats)   **(d) Conflicting Information (Republicans)**

Note: Bars indicate the percentage of Democratic and Republican respondents who support or oppose Propositions 26 and 25. White = control; light gray = party cue; dark gray = policy information; black = party + policy. The line on each bar represents the 95% confidence interval. * denotes difference with control is significant (p < 0.05, one-tailed); # denotes difference with party cue is significant (p < 0.05, one-tailed).

respondents have weak prior attitudes also show effects for policy information when party cues are present (see the supporting information).

Compared to Proposition 26, respondents had strong prior attitudes on Proposition 25, which sought to lower the legislative vote requirement to pass the state's budget from two-thirds to a simple majority. This initiative received substantial media attention. Given the difficulty of passing a budget in California in recent years, this issue was also highly salient to voters, many of whom

were likely committed to their opinions on this initiative. Indeed, the percentage of "don't knows" in the control group was lower (13%) on this initiative.

Not surprisingly, neither Democratic nor Republican respondents' opinions shift when they receive policy information that provides a reason for supporting this initiative. Indeed, Figures 3(c) and 3(d) show that respondents do not significantly respond to policy information on this initiative, whether presented by itself or with party cues. Specifically, support for Proposition 25 in the "party cue + policy information" treatment is not significantly different from the "party cue" treatment. The results for other initiatives where respondents have strong prior attitudes show similarly limited effects (see the supporting information).

Conclusion

Our survey experiments show that the often-asserted dominance of party cues over policy information is not absolute. Rather than blindly follow their party, citizens shift their opinions away from their party's positions when policy information provides a compelling reason for doing so. Thus, citizens do not ignore policy information when they are also exposed to party cues, as is frequently claimed in public opinion research. Further, politically knowledgeable and strongly partisan citizens exhibit the largest (and most objective) responses to policy information, contrary to the theory of motivated reasoning. Policy information is also most influential on issues where citizens lack strong prior attitudes. While these results contradict traditional accounts of party cues and policy information, they lend support to new theories in which partisanship includes a programmatic policy component (Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012) and is reconsidered in response to objectively changing conditions (Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012).

These results also have methodological and normative implications. Methodologically, they illustrate the benefits of including a control group in which neither party cues nor policy information is provided. This "no information" baseline allows us to evaluate competing theories of how party cues and policy information interact. A control group also provides information about the relative size of the effects of party cues and policy information and whether policy information cancels out the effect of party cues.

Our study also shows the benefits of exposing respondents to real policy information during an actual election campaign. First, such a design puts party cues and policy information on a more level playing field. Indeed, one reason why respondents in our experiments react to policy information when party cues are present, while subjects in other experiments do not, is that our respondents receive real policy information about issues that will affect them. Thus, unlike subjects in these other studies, they may be motivated to process the policy information systematically. Second, our design provides a more realistic assessment of the effects of policy information. Citizens in the real world do not often receive the counterstereotypical policy information manipulated in other experiments. Thus, understanding policy information's effects also requires a manipulation of more common types of policy information. Our provision of such information about different issues suggests another reason why our results are different from previous studies: citizens' response to party cues and policy information depends upon the nature of the policy issue.

Normatively, our study indicates that rather than abdicating their responsibility for making policy decisions, citizens can process and use policy information when forming opinions about initiatives. An important caveat is that citizens must actually receive policy information in these elections. Our results suggest that many citizens do not. Indeed, if respondents had already received the policy information provided in our study, then we should not observe a difference between our "policy information" treatment group and the control group. What we observe, however, are large opinion changes when citizens are exposed to either party cues or policy information. In this way, our results indicate that while citizens use information when they have it, they are often badly in need of it, even as few as two weeks before an election.

Finally, our results suggest lessons for practitioners who seek to inform the electorate. They indicate that communications that provide party endorsements can move citizens' opinions toward their party's positions. Policy information communicated by nonpartisan groups can also influence citizens' opinions and lead them away from their party's positions. Whether these results are good or bad for democracy is a question that cannot be resolved here. What we can say is that, in states with direct democracy, initiatives are frequently used to decide important policy issues and are typically decided by narrow majorities. In such environments, candidates, parties, interest groups, and others will continue their attempts to inform electorates. Given differences among citizens in their response to different types of information across issues, they would be wise to do so in ever more sophisticated ways.

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