

Party Cues

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The Oxford Handbook of Electoral Persuasion

Edited by Elizabeth Suhay, Bernard Grofman, and Alexander H. Trechsel

Subject: Political Science, Political Behavior, Parties and Bureaucracy

Online Publication Date: Aug 2019 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190860806.013.2

Abstract and Keywords

We now have a large and sprawling body of research on the effects of party cues. It is not very consistent or cumulative. Findings vary widely from one article to the next, and they sometimes contradict each other. This article sifts the evidence for five potential moderators of party-cue effects that have received much attention: political sophistication, need for cognition, issue salience, the amount of information in the information environment, and the distinctiveness of party reputations. It also considers the evidence on three large questions: whether party cues dominate policy information in people's judgments, whether they are "shortcuts," and how they affect our inferences about policies. The article closes by suggesting that limitations of research in this area are due partly to weak links between theory and empirical efforts and partly to problems of measurement error and statistical power.

Keywords: party cues, partisanship, political sophistication, motivated reasoning, dual-process models, party reputations, need for cognition, issue salience, information environment, information shortcuts

In the study of party cues, we marry two of the richest literatures in the study of politics: those of partisanship and of cue-taking. Partisanship is one of the chief ways by which people order their thoughts about politics. And while its effects may operate through many channels, one of the most obvious channels is the party cue. Learning that a politician belongs to a particular party, or that a party endorses a policy, may help us to reach conclusions about the politician or the policy.

We do need help if we are going to reach those conclusions. Few scholars dispute that the public knows little about politics; only rarely, it seems, will our direct knowledge of politicians and policies permit us to draw conclusions about them (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Luskin 2002). Party cues may help by permitting us to make inferences about politics that we would otherwise be unable to make. And in doing so, they may help us to act as though we are better informed than we really are. This possibility has been the hope of many scholars at least since Downs (1957).

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Of course, party cues may have a rather different effect. Instead of permitting us to act like better-informed versions of ourselves, they may lead us to mindless support of, or opposition to, policies and candidates (e.g., Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Lenz 2012; see also Dancey and Sheagley 2013; Kuklinski and Quirk 2000).

In this essay, I weigh the relevant evidence. I begin by reviewing theoretical frameworks through which party-cue effects are understood. I then turn to the main empirical findings, focusing first on moderators of party-cue effects, then on three large questions about the power of party cues. I conclude with a discussion of problems that have limited our research.

Theory

A *cue* is a message that people may use to infer other information and, by extension, to make decisions. *Party cues* come in two forms. They may reveal a person's affiliation with a party: "Trump is a Republican." Or they may link a party to a stand on an issue: "the Democrats support tax cuts."

These definitions may seem simple. But confusion often arises because authors fail to distinguish between party cues and candidate cues or between party cues and partisanship itself. Consider first the difference between party cues and candidate cues. If I tell you that "Republican Donald Trump supports tax cuts," I am not delivering a party cue in any straightforward sense. It may be difficult, with a statement like this, to separate the effect of learning that a Republican supports tax cuts from the effects of learning that a specific Republican, Donald Trump, supports tax cuts. The distinction may matter a great deal, inasmuch as people may have feelings about Trump that are distinct from their feelings about the Republican Party.

Confusion also arises because "party cues" and "partisanship" are often used interchangeably. In particular, authors often write of the effects of party cues when they mean to write about the effects of partisanship, and vice versa. Usage of this sort is an abuse of theory and of language. Cues are messages; partisanship is a feeling, not a message. Party cues can be manipulated far more easily than partisanship. And partly for that reason, the effects of party cues are more easily studied than those of partisanship.

Two frameworks have especially helped to organize our thinking about party cues: the dual-process and motivated-reasoning frameworks. For the most part, these frameworks are better seen as complementary rather than as rivals or substitutes. But some differences between them are worth drawing out.

Dual-Process Models

The theories most associated with party cues are dual-process theories of attitude change. These theories hold that persuasion can occur through "heuristic" or "systematic" information processing (Eagly and Chaiken 1993, ch. 7; see also Petty and Cacioppo

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1986). Systematic processing is effortful; it entails checking messages for internal consistency and against one's stock of existing knowledge. Heuristic processing is passive; it occurs through the use of simple decision rules rather than through evaluation of policy content. Dual-process theories hold that heuristic processing is most likely when people lack the motivation or the ability to scrutinize the messages that they receive.¹

Dual-process theories have generated several important predictions. For example, they imply that cues will generally be processed heuristically (Kam 2005; Rahn 1993; Zaller 1992, 46–48), because few people care enough about politics to scrutinize the political messages that they receive, and fewer still know enough about politics to evaluate those messages (Converse 2000; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). And because dual-process theories suggest that cues permit people to become confident of their views with little effort (Petty and Cacioppo 1986), they suggest that cues may limit attention to policy information, even if people already have that information in hand (e.g., Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014, esp. 52). Finally, the dual-process emphasis on motivation and ability suggests that people vary in the extent to which they are affected by cues—a point to which we shall return.

Motivated Reasoning

A second way of thinking about the effects of party cues is rooted in ideas about motivated reasoning (e.g., Druckman, Leeper, and Slothuus 2018; Leeper and Slothuus 2014). Motivated-reasoning approaches to cue use and to judgment typically start from the proposition that people are animated by two motives when they attempt to reason through a problem or to arrive at a decision. One is the accuracy motive: the desire to reach an accurate conclusion. The other is the directional motive: the desire to reach a conclusion of a particular kind. In political science, partisan directional motives—motives to reach conclusions that favor one's own party—have received the lion's share of attention (e.g., Lodge and Taber 2013).

So far as cues are concerned, the chief difference between the two approaches is one of emphasis. The dual-process approach emphasizes the roles of effort and ability, whereas the motivated-reasoning approach emphasizes motivation. That is, the dual-process approach implies that the probability of making a good judgment is increasing in one's effort and ability to scrutinize evidence. By contrast, the motivated-reasoning approach implies that the probability of reaching an unbiased judgment, rather than a biased one, depends less on effort or ability than on the relative strength of accuracy motives and directional motives (Leeper and Slothuus 2014, 141–142).

But by framing the difference between the approaches as a mere matter of differing emphases, one may understate the tension between them. Specifically, the contemporary dual-process approach makes little allowance for the possibility that motivation and ability to scrutinize messages can increase bias and worsen judgment.² But the possibility follows naturally from motivated-reasoning models, which stress that effort and ability may be guided by directional motives, such that they lead people to selectively embrace mes-

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sages that favor their party or to selectively reject messages that cast their party in a bad light. Motivated-reasoning models thus suggest that party cues may prompt people to uncritically embrace their party's positions and to reject other parties' positions out of hand, or to expend much effort on critical assessment of other parties' positions.

Moderators of Cue Effects

The dual-process and motivated-reasoning approaches lead to many ideas about potential moderators of party-cue effects. To evaluate these ideas, it will help to distinguish between *individual-level* and *system-level* moderators. Individual-level moderators vary across individuals; they are typically personal traits. System-level moderators vary at a higher level: for example, across issues or countries.

Individual-Level Moderators

The dual-process emphasis on ability and motivation straightforwardly suggests three individual-level moderators: political sophistication, need for cognition, and issue salience. Consider first the role of political sophistication. The term denotes the breadth, depth, and integration of people's political thoughts (Luskin 1987, 859–860). Sophisticated people are more able than others to see “what goes with what”: to see connections between different political ideas and between their own values and the political messages that they encounter. Sophistication is thus an “ability” variable in the dual-process sense. And the dual-process model therefore implies that sophisticated people are especially likely to engage in systematic processing.

By itself, this implication tells us little about cue effects. After all, cues can be processed systematically as well as heuristically (e.g., Petersen et al. 2013, esp. 834), and the greater reliance of the sophisticated on systematic processing thus tells us little about how they will be affected by cues. But recall that many other kinds of political messages—for example, complex political arguments—can only be processed systematically. More sophisticated people are more likely to think about these other kinds of political messages. And these other messages may substitute for party cues, permitting sophisticates to infer where parties stand even in the absence of explicit cues. Alternatively, these other messages may contradict the available party cues. In either case, a clear prediction is that party cues will have smaller effects among the more sophisticated, because it is among the more sophisticated that cues are more likely to be supplanted or countered by other kinds of messages.

Research inspired by motivated reasoning tends to make a contrary prediction. This research begins with the observation that greater sophistication makes partisans better able to understand the implications of political messages—does this new message imply something favorable about my party?—and thus more likely to engage in motivated reasoning with respect to those messages (e.g., Lodge and Taber 2013, 153; Taber and Lodge 2006, 757). That is, the more sophisticated will be more affected by partisan messages in general; and because they are more able to resist or “counter-argue” messages from other parties, they are especially more likely than the unsophisticated to react

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against cues from parties opposed to their own (e.g., Slothuus and de Vreese 2010, 633). Note the tension between the dual-process and motivated-reasoning predictions: the dual-process model implies that the more sophisticated will be less affected by party cues, while—at least in the eyes of some—motivated reasoning implies the opposite.³

A second moderator suggested by dual-process research is “need for cognition,” the extent to which people like to think (Arceneaux and Vander Wielen 2017, ch. 3; Cacioppo and Petty 1982). The variable is measured via responses to questions like “After finishing a task that required a lot of mental effort, do you feel more relieved than satisfied, or more satisfied than relieved?” The dual-process prediction for need for cognition is like the one for political sophistication: the greater one’s need for cognition, the more likely one is to engage in systematic processing of messages. In turn, one may be affected by certain messages, like complex political arguments, that do not affect others. And the effects of cues may be correspondingly diminished.

Our third individual-level moderator is “issue salience” or “issue involvement.” Unlike political sophistication, salience speaks to the dual-process model’s emphasis on motivation, rather than to its emphasis on ability. But at first glance, the predictions for salience are much the same. The more that one cares about an issue—that is, the more that one finds it salient—the more that one will think about messages related to the issue. In turn, one will engage with messages that can be processed only in systematic ways—messages that those who don’t care about the issue will never process. In addition, thinking more about more-salient issues may make people better able to see connections between their values and those issues, even without the aid of party cues. We may therefore expect that when one finds an issue salient, the effects of cues on one’s views of that issue are limited.

But so simple a discussion doesn’t do justice to the complexity of issue salience. The fundamental difficulty is distinguishing an issue’s “personal salience” from related concepts like the issue’s “difficulty” (e.g., Bodenhausen and Lichtenstein 1987; Carmines and Stimson 1989) or its centrality to party competition. These distinctions are not just hard to draw in practice; even in theory, they can be hard to draw. And they do matter. For example, Slothuus and de Vreese (2010, esp. 633) argue that to the extent that party competition is organized around salient issues, we should expect party cues on an issue to matter most among those for whom the issue is *most* salient. This is the opposite of the dual-process prediction. It is instead in the spirit of motivated-reasoning theories. But as Slothuus and de Vreese themselves note (643), their own work does not permit them to distinguish between issue salience, issue difficulty (whether an issue is “easy” or “hard” to think about), and the centrality of an issue to party competition. They are in good company: no existing research permits us to distinguish these effects, such that we can confidently attribute the effects of an issue to its salience rather than to its “easiness” or to its role in party competition. As our research has made little progress on distinctions of this sort, we must bear in mind that any apparent moderating role of issue salience may instead be due to these other factors.⁴

System-Level Moderators

System-level moderators are less rooted than individual-level moderators in the psychological frameworks mentioned earlier. But it is easy to see how they, too, may moderate the effects of cues. I take up two such moderators: the amount of information to which people are exposed and the clarity of party reputations.

Consider the amount of information in the “information environment.” It varies geographically: for example, there may be more coverage of political issues in some cities and states than in others. It also varies across issues: some issues are better covered and more widely discussed than others. All else equal, more robust information environments will cause people to be exposed to more messages, including—in all probability—more non-cue messages. We may therefore expect that the effects of cues will decline in such environs: the more robust the information environment, the more that people will have an opportunity to base their conclusions on messages other than cues.

The other system-level moderator taken up here is the clarity of party reputations. Party cues tell us about the content or implications of policies only to the extent that the parties themselves have clear reputations (e.g., Sniderman and Bullock 2004; Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012; see also Sniderman 2017, ch. 2). And the clarity of party reputations is affected by the ages of the parties and the number of parties that are competing in any given system. The predictions are thus straightforward: party cues will matter more when parties have clear reputations, when the parties are older, or when the number of parties competing against each other is small.

Effects of Party Cues

The main finding of party-cue research is simple: cues change people’s views. Specifically, exposure to cues that indicate a party’s stand on a policy makes members of the party more likely to adopt the party’s stand (e.g., Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010). And exposure to cues that link a politician to a party makes members of the party more supportive of the politician (e.g., Arceneaux 2008; Kirkland and Coppock 2018; Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001). These findings hold across decades of research, across countries, and across policy domains (e.g., Bullock 2011, 509–512).

Still, too strong a focus on the generality of party-cue effects will mask important variation in those effects. Reviewing all prior studies that included manipulations of both party cues and policy information, Bullock (2011, 509–510) found that the effects of the party-cue manipulations ranged from 3 to 43 percent. That is, the party-cue manipulations changed support for policies or candidates by 3 to 43 percent of the range of the scale on which preferences or attitudes were measured. More recent research has not changed this picture, and variation as great as this defeats most attempts to generalize about the sizes of party-cue effects.

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We can make progress by examining the factors associated with this massive variation. In this section, I therefore begin with the evidence about moderators. I then proceed to the evidence on three large questions: whether party cues “dominate” policy information in people’s judgments, whether they are “shortcuts,” and how they affect our inferences about policies.

Moderators

We now turn to five variables that may moderate party-cue effects. Of the five, political sophistication has attracted the most attention, and its record as a moderator may be the most puzzling or the most disappointing, depending on your point of view.

Political Sophistication

Recall the dueling predictions about political sophistication. In the argot of dual-process models, sophistication is an “ability” variable: it makes people more able to interpret complex messages about politics. We may therefore expect that sophisticated people are less affected by party cues, as they are the ones most likely to bring other kinds of information to bear when they make up their minds. By contrast, the motivated-reasoning approach notes that the more sophisticated are often more partisan and thus more likely to be affected by party cues (e.g., Lodge and Taber 2013, 153).

To date, evidence favors the dual-process prediction about political sophistication. In other words, political sophisticates seem to be less affected than others by party cues. This is, for example, the finding of Boudreau and MacKenzie (2014, esp. 57) and Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie (2019), who reach similar conclusions while using very different research designs. And it is the finding of Kam (2005), who argues that increases in sophistication are associated with increased reliance on issue-relevant values but reduced reliance on party cues.

But caution is in order as we take stock of the evidence, because most investigations of the relation between sophistication and party cues support neither the dual-process nor the motivated-reasoning prediction. Instead, their findings are null or murky. For example, Lau and Redlawsk (2001, esp. 959; 2006, 131, 240–242) find that while political knowledge increases the use of some political heuristics, it has no clear effect on whether people use party cues. Petersen et al. (2013, 843, 850–851) also find no clear effects of sophistication on cue use. Slothuus and de Vreese (2010, esp. 641) are often cited in support of the claim that sophistication heightens the effects of cues, but the evidence that they furnish is ambiguous, and the results are highly dependent on particular features of the messages to which people are exposed. Ultimately, this entire body of results is consistent with an earlier review of the elite-cues literature by Gilens and Murakawa (2002, 24–25), who focused on observational studies and found no clear role for sophistication.

Why does the evidence not speak more clearly to the association between sophistication and party-cue use? One explanation, advanced by Petersen et al. (2013, 850–851), is that the sophisticated have qualities that cancel each other out. They are better able to evalu-

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ate policy information, which should reduce the effects of party cues. But they are also more emotionally invested in their parties, which should heighten the effects of cues. This explanation is a fusion of the dual-process and motivated-reasoning approaches.

A different explanation is that measurement error plagues the study of political sophistication. The trait is often measured with only a small number of items, and it is often dichotomized, such that we distinguish between only two types of people, the sophisticated and the unsophisticated. Both small scales and dichotomization are likely to lead to measurement error (e.g., Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008; Harrell 2015, 18–21; Royston, Altman, and Sauerbrei 2006). As measurement error seems to explain a large problem in the study of our next moderator, the possibility that it also explains muddled findings in the study of sophistication should be taken seriously.

Need for Cognition

The record of need for cognition as a moderator of party-cue effects is nearly as uneven as that of political sophistication. Early studies consistently found that need for cognition only weakly moderated the effects of party cues and of other variables (Bizer et al. 2002; Fournier et al. 2004; Holbrook 2006; Kam 2005). But in more recent studies, the record has been mixed.

One vital difference between the older and newer studies is measurement error. The older studies relied on two- or even one-item measures of need for cognition. Such limited batteries of questions tend to produce noisy measures of psychological variables, which may in turn lead us to underestimate the influence of those variables (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008; see also Gillen, Snowberg, and Yariv 2018). And one of the most careful studies of need for cognition, Bakker and Lelkes (2018), suggests that previous studies were plagued by just this problem: their extremely short measures of need for cognition failed to capture the concept well. Bakker and Lelkes argue that when we use more than one or two items to measure need for cognition, we see that it does moderate party-cue effects. Specifically, they find that those high in need for cognition make more use of party cues. This is not the prediction that follows from the dual-process model: according to that model, those high in need for cognition should be better able to think about complex political messages, and party-cue effects should thus be diminished (at least relative to other kinds of messages) among such people. The Bakker-Lelkes finding is more consistent with a motivated-reasoning approach, which stresses that the more cognitively able also tend to be more partisan and thus more apt to follow party cues.

If the Bakker-Lelkes study were the only one to use an adequate measure of need for cognition, we might not hesitate to put stock in its conclusions. But at least two other works have explored the moderating role of need for cognition with batteries of adequate length, and they support a different conclusion. Bullock (2011, 502, 506) reports two studies in which need for cognition does not consistently moderate the effects of party cues (although it does moderate the effects of exposure to policy information). And Arceaux and Vander Wielen (2017, 96–106) find much the same even though they use a six-

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teen-item measure that is very similar to the Bakker-Lelkes measure. Unlike the Bakker-Lelkes finding, these findings are easy to reconcile with the dual-process model.

One may suspect that the discrepancies between these three works are due to other aspects of the experiments that they report. What is certain is that the body of evidence does not yet support firm conclusions about the extent to which need for cognition moderates party-cue effects. We simply have too few studies that employ an adequate measure of the construct.⁵

Issue Salience

The main prediction about issue salience, following from the dual-process model, is that cues will have greater effects on less salient issues. Cues are easier to interpret than non-cue information, and because people will be less inclined to think through the implications of non-cue information when they consider less salient issues, cues will have an out-sized effect on those issues.

The evidence may favor this prediction, but it is underwhelming. In their review of elite-cueing literature, Gilens and Murakawa (2002, 20) maintain that the prediction is generally supported, but they identify only one study (Carmines and Kuklinski 1990) that probes the effects of cues on both a high- and a low-salience issue. Since they wrote, more evidence in favor of the prediction has been furnished. In particular, Arceneaux and Vander Wielen (2017, 98–105) found that party cues have much stronger effects on a low-salience issue, the role of federalism in environmental regulation, than on a high-salience issue, government-provided health care. Mummolo, Peterson, and Westwood (2018) generalize this finding to a range of issues. And we find some of the largest party-cue effects in contests over initiatives, referenda, and the low-level offices that dominate most US ballots (Ansolabehere et al. 2006; Lim and Snyder 2015; Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001). Almost all of these contests are low-salience affairs.

But mixed or contrary findings seem nearly equal in weight. For example, Boudreau and MacKenzie (2014, 58–60) find that salience has no clear role as a moderator of party-cue effects. And it is clear that party cues can have noteworthy effects even on very salient issues, like whether the US military should intervene in another country (Berinsky 2009, 118–122) or the extent to which state governments should provide health care (Bullock 2011, 501, 505; see also Mummolo, Peterson, and Westwood 2018). Most notably, perhaps, Slothuus and de Vreese (2010) argue that party cues matter *more* to people's views on more-salient issues; they root this finding in a motivated-reasoning framework.

Amount of Information in the Information Environment

Scholars of political communication often write about the “information environment.” The term denotes the entire set of qualities of the information to which a group of people may be exposed, with emphasis on information that is about public affairs and is disseminated by the media. These qualities include the bias or “slant” of the information; the degree of state control over the information; civility; the medium through which the messages are

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transmitted (e.g., newspapers, television); and the number of messages transmitted in a given period.

This last feature merits special attention where party cues are concerned. Robust information environments are those in which people are exposed to many messages, including—and perhaps especially—many non-cue messages. Cue effects may decline in these environments because the environments allow people to base their conclusions on messages other than cues.

The most important studies of the claim were conducted by Peterson (2017). Unlike others, Peterson reports a party-cue study in which the amount of information in the information environment is manipulated.⁶ He finds that as the amount of information provided about a hypothetical candidate increases, the association between support for the candidate and copartisanship—that is, sharing the candidate's party—decreases. Peterson finds similar albeit smaller results in an observational study based on the Snyder-Strömberg (2010) measures of the congruence of congressional districts and media markets.⁷ Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2015) also report a similar result. And in general, observational studies suggest that party cues are especially strong in low-information contests (Ansolabehere et al. 2006; Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001). Thus, although good studies on this point are few, the body of evidence does suggest that the power of party cues declines as the information environment improves.

Distinctiveness of Party Reputations

The last of our quintet of potential moderators, and the one for which the data speak most clearly, is the distinctiveness of party reputations. In some countries, political parties are distinct from each other with respect to policy and other matters. In other countries, differences between the parties are harder to see. The two major determinants of distinctiveness are the number of parties and their ages: all else equal, parties are more distinct when they have fewer competitors and when they are long-established (e.g., Bullock 2011, 511–512). It is no accident, then, that party cues seem to be stronger in the United States than in other countries. No democracy has fewer major parties than the United States, and no democracy has multiple major parties that have been well-established for so long (Brader and Tucker 2009, 33; Lijphart and Aitkin 1994, 160–162).

Although most party-cue research has been conducted within the United States, we now have a critical mass of party-cue studies in other countries. And it strongly supports the claim that the distinctiveness of party reputations moderates party-cue effects. For example, Brader and Tucker (2009) conducted party-cue experiments in Great Britain, Poland, and Hungary. They found that party cues changed policy attitudes most in Great Britain and least in Poland, with Hungary in between—exactly what we would expect if the strength of party cues depends on the extent to which parties have clear reputations. Hobolt (2007, esp. 168–171) finds generally weak effects of party cues in a Norwegian referendum on accession to the European Union; there were eight such parties, which may have made it difficult for the parties to distinguish themselves on the issue. Kobayashi and Yokoyama (2018) find weak party-cue effects in Japan, and they attribute this re-

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sult to the vagueness of the parties' reputations. Similarly, Merolla, Stephenson, and Zechmeister (2007; 2008) find only modest effects of party cues in Mexico and Canada. Canada has a long tradition of competitive parties, but they have historically been part of a "brokerage" system in which policy and ideology have been subordinate to the task of building winning coalitions (Stevenson 1987). Tellingly, the largest exception to the pattern of modest effects in these countries is the Merolla, Stephenson, and Zechmeister (2008, esp. 688) finding that cue effects in Canada are largest for the New Democratic Party, which is the party in their study that has the most consistent set of positions on social and economic issues.

Our understanding of the distinctiveness of party reputations as a moderator does not come only from comparisons of cue effects across countries. It comes, too, from survey analyses and lab experiments. For example, Levendusky (2010) exposes subjects to cues on policy issues, but some of his subjects are randomly assigned to read that members of Congress are divided on the issue along party lines, while others are randomly assigned to read that members of Congress are not divided. He finds that "polarized cues"—the cues involving more distinct parties—are the ones that matter more. Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus (2013) also find that polarized cues have stronger effects on policy views, and they further find that polarized cues increase the confidence that people repose in their views while decreasing the effects of policy information on those views. Finally, Sniderman and Stiglitz (2012, esp. 79–91) use survey data to argue for the existence of an "order rule" which is related to the idea that the distinctiveness of party reputations is an important moderator. Their argument is that candidates reap the benefits of their parties' reputations only when they are "ordered" as one would expect, such that the candidate of the more liberal party is himself more liberal than the candidate of the more conservative party.

None of this evidence should be construed to mean that party cues never matter in young democracies or in democracies whose parties are indistinct. They sometimes do. For example, Conroy-Krutz, Moehler, and Aguilar (2016) find that party cues have substantial effects on vote choice in a Ugandan election, even though Uganda's multiparty system was only five years old at the time. And Lau and Redlawsk (2006, esp. 137) use an experiment to argue that as the number of candidates in an election increases—and as the candidates thus become less distinct from each other, all else equal—party-cue effects become stronger. But findings of this sort are the exception, not the rule.

Three Major Questions

Turn now to three of the broadest questions about the effects of party cues. First, do party-cue effects "dominate" those of policy information? Second, is there a meaningful sense in which party cues are cognitive "shortcuts"—and if so, what is that sense? Third, what is the mechanism through which party cues affect our views of policies and candidates?

Cues Do Not Dominate Policy Information

Building on findings about the apparent power of party identification (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960, esp. ch. 6), a generation of scholars advanced the claim that party cues dominate other information about policy. That is, if people encounter both information about a policy and party cues that indicate where their party stands, the policy information does not affect their views of the policy. Only the cues matter. To wit:

- McGuire (1969, 198) argued that a citizen is a “lazy organism” who relies heavily on source cues and “tries to master the message contents only when absolutely necessary.”
- Zaller (1992, 45) wrote that even when “citizens are well-informed, they react mechanically to political ideas on the basis of external cues about partisan implications” and “typically fail to reason for themselves about the persuasive communications they encounter.”
- Rahn (1993, 492) maintained that people “neglect policy information in reaching evaluations” even when they are exposed to it; instead, they “use the party label rather than policy attributes in drawing inferences.”
- Iyengar and Valentino (2000, 109) held that cue-based processing of messages “predominates” over evaluation of their content.
- And Cohen (2003) summarized this line of thinking in the title of his article on political decision-making: “Party over Policy: The Dominating Impact of Group Influence on Political Beliefs.”

All of these claims now seem too strong. They were made on the basis of inadequate evidence: when they were written, few studies permitted direct comparisons of the effects of cues and policy information. Those that did tended to examine the effects of “policy information” so minimal that it barely deserved to be called policy information at all. For example, subjects in an experiment might be asked to evaluate a policy that would “decrease services a medium amount”; they would receive no other information about the policy. And even the best studies that authors used to compare the effects of cues and policy information sometimes suffered from design flaws, such that the apparent effects of cues in these studies may actually have been due to other factors (Bullock 2011, 511; Nicholson 2011, 1175).

Other studies suggest that party cues limit the effects of efforts to persuade, including efforts that are based on provision of policy information. For example, Druckman (2001, 238–239) finds that party cues reduce our ability to persuade people to support a policy simply by describing it in a different (but logically equivalent) way. And in a review of field experiments on persuasion, Kalla and Broockman (2018, esp. 153) find strong evidence that such efforts are in vain during general elections. They also find some evidence that persuasive efforts are more successful in primaries and ballot-measure contests, where party cues are less prominent. They speculate that party cues make people resistant to persuasive efforts, including persuasive efforts that involve policy information. Both the Druckman and the Kalla-Broockman studies thus suggest that party cues limit

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persuadability. But as neither study involves the manipulation of both party cues and another kind of information (and as many of the experiments that Kalla and Broockman review don't involve party cues in any way), these studies have only a limited ability to speak to the claim that party cues dominate policy information.⁸

By contrast, a relatively recent set of studies was designed specifically to speak to the “domination” claim. All of these studies involve separate but simultaneous manipulation of exposure to party cues and policy information. Importantly, these studies have furnished little support for the domination claim, and a fair amount of support for the claim that the effects of policy information sometimes equal or exceed those of party cues. For example, Bullock (2011) finds that when people read newspaper articles about state-sponsored health care, party cues do affect their views of the policy under consideration—but, on average, information about the policy matters more. Nicholson (2011, esp. 1171–1174) finds much the same in a study of the effects of party cues and information about welfare policy, even though his descriptions of policy are far shorter than those used by Bullock. And Boudreau and MacKenzie (2014, esp. 55) find a similar result in their study of California ballot propositions, again using quite brief descriptions of policy. All three of these experiments are like each other, and unlike most of their predecessors, in two senses. First, they were designed to test the claim about the relative influence of cues and policy information; they were factorial experiments in which cues and policy information were separately and simultaneously manipulated. Second, the authors were careful to avoid confounds in experimental design that may have affected previous research (Bullock 2011, 511; Nicholson 2011, 1175).

Are Party Cues Shortcuts?

One of the most important political-psychology ideas is that cues are “cognitive shortcuts” that help people to conserve effort when making decisions (e.g., Downs 1957; Popkin 1994). There are two senses in which party cues may be effort-saving shortcuts: they may reduce thinking about information at hand, or they may lead people to cut short their search for further decision-relevant information. But whether party cues actually perform either of these tasks is an empirical question, and the answers that we have to date are surprising.

Consider first the question of whether party cues reduce attention to other information that one has at hand. The studies that take up this question speak in one voice: no, party cues do not seem to reduce attention to other information when people have that other information at hand. In particular, Bullock (2011, esp. 507) measures attention to information in four different ways, including the amount of time spent reading a description of a health-care policy and the ability, after reading the description, to recall details that it mentioned. Across all four measures, and in spite of an unusually large sample, he finds no evidence that cues reduce attention to information. Cohen (2003, esp. 814–815) differs from Bullock in numerous ways, but his finding on this point is much the same. And Petersen et al. (2013, 848–849) go further, using measures of response latency to argue that party cues may increase, rather than reduce, attention to policy information.

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Obviously, the attention that one pays to information is distinct from the influence of that information on one's views. It is possible, for example, that cues reduce the effects of other kinds of information without reducing attention to that information. Even so, these two estimands are related. If we find that cues reduce the effects of the information that people have before them, we will have further evidence—even if it is only suggestive—that cues reduce attention to that information. Examination of this possibility requires studies in which the availability of party cues and another kind of information is separately but simultaneously manipulated. Only a few studies meet this condition, and those that do have not found that cues reduce the effects of other information. For example, the Bullock and Petersen et al. studies cited earlier offer no support for the claim that cues reduce the effects of other information. The question is also taken up by Boudreau and MacKenzie (2014, 54–56), Nicholson (2011, 1171–1174), and Peterson (2018, 18–19); Boudreau, MacKenzie, and Nicholson find no evidence that cues reduce the effects of other information, while Peterson finds this result in only one of six analyses. One of the oldest studies to involve simultaneous manipulation of party cues and other kinds of information, Cohen (2003), does find that cues reduce the effects of policy information—but Cohen's estimates may be affected by confounds in his experimental designs (Bullock 2011, 511; Nicholson 2011, 1175), and at this point in the development of the evidence, his study is an outlier.⁹

Even if party cues do not limit thinking about the information that one has at hand, they may limit the search for new information. That is, a cue may seem to suffice for decision-making purposes; once one has it, the expected cost of seeking further decision-relevant information may outweigh the expected benefit. In light of the research which suggests that cues do not limit thinking about the information already at hand, this second possibility—that cues limit the search for new information—is the best way to salvage the claim that party cues are “shortcuts.”

Unfortunately, research on this point is especially limited. Perhaps the most relevant work is a study by Sinclair and Wray (2015) of California's state assembly elections. A distinctive feature of these elections is that they sometimes feature competition between two candidates of the same party. Sinclair and Wray find that when the candidates are of different parties, people are less likely to search for information about them via Google. This finding does suggest that party cues limit information search. But more research is necessary before we can generalize on this point.¹⁰

To date, then, research does not suggest that party cues limit either hard thinking about the information at hand or the search for new information. If party cues do not in fact limit either kind of activity, they are not shortcuts. And if party cues are not shortcuts, the study of party cues has been beset by a fundamental misapprehension. The conclusion that party cues are not shortcuts would hardly invalidate all empirical work in the area—but it would require a fundamental rethinking of the topic.

Party Cues, Partisanship, and Policy Inferences

Party cues affect people's views of policies and candidates. But through what mechanism do they have these effects? The major potential explanations lie with policy inferences and the stoking of partisan feeling (e.g., Fowler 2018). By the first explanation, party cues lead me to make inferences about the character of, say, a policy: if I learn that a liberal party has endorsed a policy, I may infer that the policy is liberal. By the second explanation, party cues may not indicate the character of a policy, but they do indicate where groups that are important to me stand on an issue. They tell me, for example, where the Democratic and Republican parties stand on the issue. I may define my identity through affiliation with, or opposition to, these groups (Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015). I may have strong feelings about them. And by heightening these feelings, party cues may change my views, even if they don't lead me to make inferences about the policy's ideological character.

These explanations are compatible. Party cues may affect people's views both because they lead people to make inferences about the policy's character and because they heighten partisan feeling. But while scholars have written for decades about the possibility that partisanship itself may work through these mechanisms (e.g., Downs 1957; Lodge and Taber 2013), they have not gotten down to the difficult business of studying the extent to which party cues operate through one mechanism rather than the other.¹¹

There have been suggestive forays into related areas. For example, Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2015) and Peterson (2018) conduct experiments in which subjects choose between two candidates. They manipulate the amount of information that subjects receive about the candidates. And they find that as subjects receive more information—particularly more information about the candidates' policy views—their choices seem to depend less on the candidates' party affiliations. These results are consistent with a view of cues as substitutes for policy information, by which the value of cues declines when one has the policy information in hand. By contrast, Zaller (1992, 97) tells the story of Republican activists reversing their position on wage and price controls immediately after Nixon reversed his position. And Lenz (2012) argues that voters typically “follow the leader” so far as policies are concerned: instead of choosing the candidate who best matches her policy views, a voter is likely to settle on a candidate and then bring her views into line with those of the candidate. These latter studies seem consistent with cues working in ways that have little to do with inferences about policies.

Critically, none of these studies are studies of party cues, at least not in a direct sense. Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2015) and Peterson (2018) manipulate the type and extent of information that subjects receive about candidates, but they never manipulate party cues. Neither Zaller nor Lenz manipulate anything, and they are generally writing about cues from specific and well-known political figures. These cues might be called “candidate cues,” but they are too closely tied to specific politicians to teach us much about party cues.

Discussion

Our body of research on party cues now permits a few generalizations. On average, party cues do affect people's views of policies and candidates. And the less distinct the parties, the less influential the party cues will be. But even when the parties are distinct, the effects of party cues do not come close to "dominating" those of policy information. Nor do party cues reduce attention to policy information, at least if one has that information in hand.

There is more that we do not yet know. We do not know, for example, whether political sophistication tends to reduce or to increase the effects of party cues. We are also at a loss when we try to characterize the roles of need for cognition or issue salience as moderators. Or when we try to speak to the question of whether party cues limit the search for other kinds of information—a question central to the claim that cues are cognitive shortcuts.

In light of the decades of attention that have been paid to party cues, we should pause to reflect on why we have not learned more. Two reasons seem especially worth drawing out: inadequate links between theory and measurement, and problems of measurement error and statistical power.

Weak Links between Theory and Empirical Research: Our Variables Don't Vary

In the study of party cues, the mismatch between theory and empirical research is striking. The general problem is that our theory is richer than our data, and a specific problem in this vein is that we do not let our variables vary. That is, theory specifies that a variable varies across or even within individuals, but the variable is measured in ways that permit no such variation. For example, expositions of dual-process theory are quick to acknowledge that any individual will think heuristically at some times, systematically at others. But our most common measures of "depth of processing" are variables like need for cognition—that is, variables that are stable at the individual level and that are typically measured just once in our studies. The result is a major mismatch between theory and empirics. The theory calls on us to acknowledge that depth of processing varies within people and depends on context; the empirical analysis implicitly denies just these points.

A second example further illustrates the problem. Issue salience is typically discussed as an individual-level variable. It is appropriate to think of it this way, because the issues that matter to me may not matter to you, and vice versa. But when we study the moderating role of issue salience, we typically neglect this aspect of the variable. That is, instead of measuring the salience of an issue to each subject in our study, we simply stipulate that one issue is of "high salience" while another is of "low salience." These designations may be correct on average, but by failing to allow an issue's salience to vary from person to

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person, we open a wide gap between theory and measurement, and we fail to gather data that have a chance of speaking powerfully to the questions that interest us.

Measurement Error and Statistical Power

A further set of obstacles is about measurement error and statistical power. Consider measurement error first. Bakker and Leikes (2018) and Bullock (2011) point to the inadequacy of conventional, extremely short measures of need for cognition. And much the same point has been made for other relevant variables. For example, Bakker and Leikes (2018) and Boston et al. (2018) point out the inadequacy of short measures of the Big Five personality traits, and Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2008) show that measurement error plagues our measures of political attitudes. In every case, the problem is the same: we use too few survey items to measure the quantities that interest us. The consequence is unreliable scales and null results that are likely to be misleading.

If we shoot ourselves in the foot by using too few items to measure our variables, we take aim at vital organs when we conduct underpowered studies. It is easy, for example, to find recent experiments in which only fifty or so subjects have been assigned to each condition. In practice, these studies are massively underpowered: even if an effect exists, their chance of detecting it is minimal. The common reply is that all measures are noisier with small samples; thus, if a statistically significant result appears, it is all the more impressive for appearing in a small sample. But this reply is inadequate. It is true that statistically significant results are less likely to appear in underpowered studies, but conditional on finding them, they are much more likely to be of the wrong sign and much more likely to overstate the true effect sizes (Gelman 2018; Gelman and Carlin 2014; see also Zaller 2002). A large portion of all research on party cues involves samples that are far too small, given that we typically rely on between-person comparisons and noisy measurement of key variables. Unfortunately, this research can tell us next to nothing about how party cues work.

The Future of Research on Party Cues

The social-science temptation is to synthesize. To impose order—a framework, a narrative—on a set of findings that may seem patternless or chaotic. But when we embark on this enterprise, we must be careful to ensure that we don't do violence to the actual findings before us. That we do not generalize far beyond the limits of the data.

So far as party-cue research is concerned, the data do not permit as many generalizations as we would like. This conclusion may surprise readers, as there have now been many dozens of studies of party cues. But most of the older studies in this group are both non-experimental and purely survey-based, and in such studies, it is nearly impossible to separate the effects of cues from the effects of the myriad variables that are correlated with exposure to cues. Many other studies are plagued by small samples, noisy measures of key variables, or both. These studies, too, can tell us little or nothing about the effects of party cues. Others are more promising, at least so far as research design is concerned.

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But their findings are varied. Moreover, we have many distinct hypotheses about party cues, and no study can speak to more than a few of them.

Still, as this essay has shown, our research does permit a few confident, important generalizations about the effects of party cues and the moderators of those effects. And as our research designs improve, we are groping our way toward more and better generalizations. There is every reason to expect that progress will continue and that, by the time the next edition of this *Handbook* is published, we will know more than we do now.

Acknowledgements:

I thank Bert Bakker, Cheryl Boudreau, Jamie Druckman, Andrew Gelman, Bernard Grofman, Yanna Krupnikov, Rick Lau, Thomas Leeper, Yph Lelkes, Matt Levendusky, Erik Peterson, Dave Redlawsk, and Rune Slothuus for helpful discussions. Please send comments to john.bullock@northwestern.edu.

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Notes:

(1.) See Mondak (1994, esp. 166–168) for a brief and helpful overview of the "heuristic-systematic" dual-process model and its relevance to political cues.

(2.) I distinguish here between classic and contemporary dual-process approaches. Classic expositions of dual-process models did raise just this possibility (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo 1986, esp. ch. 5).

(3.) For further discussions of this tension, see Petersen et al. 2013 and Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014. But see also Grofman ("Reasoned Persuasion," this volume), whose focus is on the compatibility of dual-process and motivated-reasoning approaches, not least where political sophistication is concerned.

(4.) See Kam and Trussler (2017) for a related discussion of the difficulty of making causal claims about moderators.

(5.) We are on firmer ground when we consider the extent to which need for cognition moderates the effects of exposure to policy information and policy arguments. In this case, the three works mentioned here speak in a single voice: the greater one's need for cognition, the greater the effects of policy information and policy arguments.

Party Cues

(6.) See Lau and Redlawsk (2006) for experiments that do not include amount-of-information manipulations but that are somewhat similar in spirit.

(7.) Some congressional districts overlap almost perfectly with the markets for certain newspapers. In other cases, congressional districts are much less “congruent” with the areas served by newspapers. Snyder and Strömberg (2010) use variation in congruence to identify the effects of press coverage on political outcomes, and Peterson uses the same variation to make an argument about the power of the information environment to limit party-cue effects.

(8.) The Kalla-Broockman review reminds us that the effects produced by treatments in survey experiments often far exceed the effects produced by similar treatments in field experiments. See Barabas and Jerit (2010).

(9.) A distinct question is whether polarization of party elites, rather than party cues themselves, reduces the influence of policy information on people’s views. It may. See Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus (2013).

(10.) Lau and Redlawsk (2006, esp. 240) report the most relevant experimental work that I know, but even their study does not speak directly to the question.

(11.) Mechanism questions are notoriously difficult to answer in politics and in psychology, at least with any precision. Standard methods of mediation analysis impose strong assumptions that our research does not come close to meeting (e.g., Bullock, Green, and Ha 2010; Bullock and Ha 2011; Glynn 2012; Imai, Keele, and Tingley 2010, 313). For more promising research strategies, see Gerber and Green (2012, ch. 8), Bullock, Green, and Ha (2010, 554–556), and the experimental-design recommendations of Imai, Tingley, and Yamamoto (2013).

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