

Legislator Influence on Constituent Beliefs and Behavior
Pre-Analysis Plan

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October 31, 2018

1 Introduction

The planned research project assesses the role of elite influence on voting choices made by American citizens. In the event that constituents and their representatives differ with regard to a particular policy position, constituents seem to be more willing to adopt their representatives' policy positions than to alter their evaluation of those representatives. However, examination of heterogeneity in this behavior across policy areas has been largely absent from the contemporary American politics research agenda. Similarly, the extent to which the appearance of opinion change can be attributed to a priming or cheerleading effects versus genuine, enduring opinion change has gone largely uninvestigated. I plan a survey experiment measuring elite influence on public opinion on two policies scheduled to appear on the November 6, 2018 general election ballot in Massachusetts. By examining post-treatment opinions, willingness to take political action, and self-reported voting behavior following the election in different policy areas, I will be able to assess the extent to which priming and cheerleading effects characterize the phenomenon of elite influence on public opinion, as well as whether elite influence on public opinion exhibits heterogeneity across issue areas.

2 Theory and Motivation

When constituents are informed that their co-partisan representative's policy positions differ from their own, constituents tend to adopt the position of the representative rather than altering their assessment of the representative. This phenomenon has been well-documented in recent years. Lenz (2009, 2013) uses panel survey data to show that as constituents learn about their representatives' positions during campaigns, they often update their stated policy preferences to match. Broockman and Butler (2017) test elite influence on public opinion in an experimental framework, showing that official communication from state legislators alters subjects' policy preferences rather than their evaluation of their legislators.

However, we understand relatively little about how this phenomenon operates for different types of policy, and whether the changes identified in constituent opinions represent true learning and opinion change, or are the results of priming or partisan cheerleading—the provision of responses motivated by partisanship rather than factual knowledge. Bullock et al. (2015), for example, show that financial incentives for accuracy greatly reduce partisan bias in reported beliefs about factual information, suggesting that partisan cheerleading is reduced when subjects' responses have personal material implications. I propose a two-wave survey experiment assessing whether elite influence on public opinion as measured by simple survey response outcomes represents true learning or partisan cheerleading. Of particular importance is whether subjects' stated preference changes translate to behavioral outcomes that have material ramifications, here measured by vote choice in public referendums.

The answer to this question has significant implications for our understanding of citizens' preference formation and for the role that citizens play in the American democracy. If citizens truly update their policy preferences to match their representatives, citizens' ability and desire to sanction their representatives for dissonant legislating behavior is greatly undermined. In addition, the outcomes of directly democratic votes, such as public initiatives and veto referendums, would be largely determined by the preferences of representatives. This is the conclusion put forward

by much of the recent literature on the topic, and is, I believe, too pessimistic a portrayal of the prospect for citizen-led democracy in the United States. The research project here proposed seeks to clarify and refine this conclusion.

I first propose to examine whether elite influence on public opinion varies with issue difficulty. For “easy” issues—issues that produce a response and opinion without a great deal of knowledge or thought (Carmines and Stimson, 1989)—I hypothesize that constituents will be unwilling to change their opinions after learning that their representatives disagree. I anticipate that for “hard” issues, or issues that require substantial knowledge and reflection, more citizens will be willing to adopt their representatives’ positions.

Finally, I anticipate that while treatment subjects are likely to state a changed opinion in the context of the initial experiment, at least for “easy” issues, these treatment effects are likely to be short-lived (Gerber et al., 2011). I expect that these results are unlikely to carry over into behavioral outcomes, such as voting decisions, and as a result the phenomenon identified as elite influence on public opinion could be more accurately described as partisan cheerleading.

3 Research Design

3.1 Treatment Assignment Procedure

I propose conducting a two-wave survey experiment during the general election in Massachusetts to evaluate the hypotheses identified above. A veto referendum is held when the state legislature passes a bill that is later referred to the voting public; voters decide whether the legislature-approved policy should be confirmed or repealed. This situation presents the rare opportunity for constituents and representatives to vote on an identically worded policy. During the midterm elections in November 2018, Massachusetts voters will decide whether or not to repeal SB 2407, a bill prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender identity—defined as a person’s sincerely held gender-related identity, appearance, or behavior, whether or not it is different from the gender traditionally associated with the person’s physiology or their assigned sex at birth. At the same time, Massachusetts voters will cast ballots on whether or not to adopt a ballot initiative limiting the number of patients hospital nurses are allowed to be assigned. While this issue has not been voted on in the state legislature, the Republican governor of Massachusetts, Charlie Baker, has come out against the initiative, while both Democratic US Senators, Ed Markey and Elizabeth Warren, have come out in favor of the initiative.

One week prior to the referendum vote in each state, I plan to begin a survey experiment with the following design: respondents from Massachusetts will be recruited from the online sample provider Lucid. Attached as part of the pre-analysis plan is the questionnaire for this experiment, which includes wordings for all questions.

For each issue, I employ a 2x2 factorial treatment design, randomizing both issue difficulty and the provision of information regarding legislators’ positions on the issue. On the transgender identity protection veto referendum, respondents will be randomly assigned to either “hard” or “easy” versions of a question asking their position on the referendum. The “easy” version identifies the

referendum as being about whether or not anti-discrimination protections should be extended to transgender citizens in public places. The “hard” version of this question includes information raising the possibility that MA law already covered gender identity discrimination prior to SB 2407, rendering SB 2407 unnecessary, an open question and an opposition talking point. As most voters are not experts on Massachusetts discrimination law, this version of the question is harder in that it implies that such knowledge is necessary to have a valid opinion on the issue. Subjects will separately be assigned to either see a prompt with information regarding legislators’ positions on the referendum, the treatment condition, or receive no such prompt, the control condition. Using the respondents’ zip code, respondents will be matched to their representatives in the Massachusetts State Senate. Treatment subjects will be told how their state senator, identified by name and party, voted on the issue. Treatment subjects whose state senator cannot be identified, or whose state senator did not vote on SB 2407, will be informed that both Charlie Baker, Republican governor of Massachusetts, and US Senator Elizabeth Warren, a Democrat, support the referendum.

The treatment procedure for the nurse-patient limits initiative follows the same design. The “hard” version of this issue provides conflicting accounts of whether the bill will have a positive—by increasing the amount of attention nurses can give to each patient—or negative—by decreasing nurses’ flexibility and decision-making authority—impact on health outcomes in Massachusetts. As most voters are not experts in hospital workflows and health outcomes, this framing makes the initiative appear to require a high level of information to assess. The “easy” version of this issue frames the bill as being a question of improved health outcomes versus increased costs for the state. This makes the issue easier for subjects to form an opinion on, as they are able to prioritize either improving health or being fiscally responsible.

With this design, I will be able to assess the interaction between issue difficulty and a follow-the-leader effect within each issue. I will also be able to compare whether the effects vary across issue area, in this case assessing whether follow-the-leader treatment effect sizes differ significantly for civil rights and health care.

3.2 Outcomes

There are several outcomes of interest for this study.

First, following treatment, subjects will be asked their degree of support for each referendum on a five-point scale from strongly support to strongly oppose.

Second, subjects that express support for the gender identity protection initiative will be invited to click on a link that directs them to the “Take Action” webpage of Freedom Massachusetts, the organization leading support for the referendum. Subjects who express opposition to the referendum will be invited to click on a link that directs them to the “Take Action” webpage for Keep MA Safe, the organization leading opposition for the referendum. Subjects that express support for the nurse-patient limits initiative will be invited to click on a link that directs them to the “Take Action” webpage of Ensure Safe Patient Care, the organization leading support for the referendum. Subjects who express opposition to the referendum will be invited to click on a link that directs them to the “Take Action” webpage for Protect Patient Safety, the organization leading opposition for the referendum.

Third, subjects will be asked a battery of questions about transgender issues that are intended to assess latent “feelings towards transgender individuals,” following the design employed in Broockman and Kalla (2016), with some question wording updates.

Finally, respondents will be asked for their evaluations of their state senator, as well as Massachusetts elected officials Governor Charlie Baker, US Senator Elizabeth Warren and US Senator Ed Markey on a one hundred point feeling thermometer.

Following the November 6, 2018 election, subjects will be re-contacted and asked to take a follow-up survey. This survey will ask subjects a) whether and how they voted in the veto referendum, b) how they would assess their state senator and other Massachusetts representatives at this point in time, and c) whether or not they voted for those officials during the election.

3.3 Analysis

There are several estimated values of interest in the proposed study. I have included with this pre-analysis plan an R script that simulates experimental data for the nurse-patient limits issue with the data-generating process I believe is operating in this experiment and demonstrates a preliminary estimation procedures.

I will be able to assess the ATE of elite influence on public opinion by comparing the average positions on each ballot issue between those receiving the legislator cue treatments and those in the control groups. I also will assess treatment effect in terms of difference in binary support/oppose position, simplified from the five-point scale mentioned above.

With the factorial design described above, I will also be able to assess whether the interaction between “hard” framing and legislator cues increases the follow-the-leader effect within each issue.

I will also assess whether the follow-the-leader effect, and its interaction with issue difficulty, vary between issue areas. Since the estimands in this case, statistically different treatment effects across issue area, are on the same scale, I will assess this by including a dummy variable for the issue area in the analysis regression.

I will assess the treatment effect on behavioral outcomes by comparing the rates of treatment and control subjects clicking on the provided link to “take action.” To avoid conditioning on a post-treatment variable, the subjects’ position on the bill, I will analyze these separately for supporters and opponents of each bill.

I will assess treatment effects on latent opinion towards transgender individuals by comparing control group latent opinion to treatment group latent opinion.

For the follow-up survey, I will compare respondents’ stated voting choices between treatment and control groups, to assess whether the initial informational treatments influence (reported) vote choices similarly to the way they influence survey responses in the first wave.

Because one of the central questions in this experiment is whether or not treatment effects for receiving legislator cues estimated via survey responses carry over to both latent opinion and to behavior such as choosing to take action in support of an issue and eventual voting choice, I need to be able to compare ATEs across several of the outcomes described above, some of which are not on the same scale. In order to do this, I will generate standardized outcome measures for the bill position survey outcome, the behavioral outcome clicking on the link, and the post-election reported vote. The standardized outcome will be produced by subtracting the control group mean from each outcome and dividing by the control group standard deviation. This will leave the control group with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one for every outcome. ATEs for each outcome will be measured in standard deviation units, and will therefore be comparable across different types of outcomes. This will enable assessment of whether the average treatment effect estimates are statistically differentiable for the survey response, behavior, latent transgender attitudes, and reported vote choice.

To conduct this analysis, I will use OLS regression to identify the presence of treatment effects, using covariate adjustment for demographic and political variables such as education and partisanship. As shown in Chapter 2 of Gerber and Green (2012), the difference-in-means is unbiased for the average treatment effect for all outcome spaces, therefore OLS with covariate adjustment is consistent for estimating the average treatment effects in each of these cases. For the behavioral outcome of clicking on the link to take action, because the outcome is binomial and is likely to have a low incidence rate, I will also estimate a logit model for this outcome.

3.4 Hypotheses

I expect that treatment respondents will be more likely to state an opinion on the measures closer to co-partisan representatives' and farther from representatives who have opposing partisanship. This means that, compared to the control group, Democratic treatment subjects will be more likely to adopt the policy position taken by Democratic representatives, while Republican treatment subjects will be more likely to adopt an opposing position to their Democratic representatives.

I hypothesize that the "hard" framing will tend to push respondents closer to the middle of the response spectrum, while the "easy" framing will push respondents closer to their political party's position on the issue, independent from partisan cues. Seeing the "hard" framing will make Democratic respondents less likely to support the gender-identity referendum and less likely to support creating nurse-patient limits when compared with Democrats receiving the "easy" framing. Seeing the "hard" framing will make Republican respondents less likely to oppose the gender-identity referendum and less likely to oppose creating nurse-patient limits when compared to Republicans receiving the "easy" framing.

I believe that the interaction between receiving legislator cues and receiving the "hard" framing will increase the effectiveness of the cues. Respondents who receive the legislator cues and see the issue framed as requiring high levels of information will be more likely to adopt their party's position, whether they see a co-partisan prompt and adopt that position, or an opposing party prompts and adopt the opposite position.

While I expect the average treatment effect to follow this general trend for both transgender identity protection and limitations on the number of patients nurses can be responsible for, I expect the magnitude of the treatment effect on subjects' policy positions to be greater for the initiative regarding nurse care. I believe that this is an inherently more "difficult" issue, in the context of this discussion, as it lacks obvious partisan positioning.

I do not expect the framing or the legislator cues to have a significant effect on either latent position towards transgender people, incidence of clicking on the link, or on vote choice. If my hypothesis is correct, we should not see an effect in this index because the treatment effect observed in the survey responses is an artifact of partisan cheerleading, rather than true opinion change.

I will test each of these one-tailed hypotheses, using randomization inference, and will report 95% confidence intervals generated through randomization inference.

When comparing the different outcomes' standardized treatment effects using the standardized outcome metric described above, I will use randomization inference in order to generate 95% confidence intervals in order to assess whether the effect estimate confidence intervals overlap for the different outcomes. Partisan cheerleading would be suggested by statistically significant treatment effects on the standardized survey response outcomes without statistically significant treatment effects on the behavioral outcome, reported vote choice, or latent feelings toward transgender people. Showing that the treatment effects for these three types of outcomes are statistically different from one another however, would be provide more conclusive evidence for partisan cheerleading being at work in the follow-the-leader phenomenon.

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