

Knowledge Experts, Political Leaders, and Public Support for International Cooperation

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October 2024

Abstract

Can international policy experts sway public support for international cooperation? And how might complementary or contrasting cues from partisan political leaders moderate the influence of experts? We study these questions using pre-registered survey experiments fielded on 3,500 Americans. We find that the US public is responsive to cues from knowledge elites, but the magnitude of the effect depends on the valence of the cue and the political context in which it is sent. In our experiments, we exposed respondents to endorsements and/or denunciations of proposed international agreements from knowledge elites, political elites, or both. We find that cues denouncing proposed agreements are generally more potent than otherwise identical cues from the same actors endorsing the policy and that, on average, cues from experts can move the public just as much as cues from political elites. In addition, we find evidence that domain-relevant knowledge can make expert endorsements more powerful than otherwise identical endorsements from experts without domain-relevant expertise. Finally, we document important counterbalancing effects that occur when knowledge and political elites disagree on the wisdom or folly of a given policy and reinforcing effects when the experts and political elites agree.

Competing interest declaration: None of the authors have a conflict of interest to declare.

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In 2017 President Trump announced that he would no longer recertify Iranian compliance with the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), effectively withdrawing the United States from that international treaty. In response, more than 90 nuclear weapons experts publicly expressed their support for the treaty. They wrote to Congress opposing U.S. withdrawal “as scientists who understand the physics and technology of nuclear power, of nuclear explosives, and of long-range missiles; and who collectively bring their experience with nuclear nonproliferation” (Gladstone 2017). Five years later, a similar group of 40 experts on nuclear nonproliferation issued a statement pressing President Biden to reach a new nuclear agreement with Iran, arguing that failure to do so would be “irresponsible” and “would increase the danger that Iran would become a threshold nuclear-weapon state” (DeYoung 2022).

Such expert cues rarely occur in isolation. In 2015, numerous Democratic lawmakers publicly endorsed the JCPOA. New Hampshire Sen. Jeanne Shaheen argued that the Iran agreement “is the best available option we have for preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon” (Shaheen 2015). On the other side of the political aisle, when Biden attempted to revive the Iran deal in 2022, House Speaker John Boehner of Ohio declared his opposition by stating, “I don’t know how you cut a deal with the devil and think the devil is going to keep his end of the deal” (Hulse 2015).

The case of the Iran agreement raises important questions about the role of expert endorsements and denunciations in sustaining and/or undermining support for international cooperation. Can cues from international policy experts—individuals with specialized knowledge about international affairs—sway public opinion on international cooperation? If so, are cues from experts with domain-relevant knowledge more persuasive than cues from experts whose knowledge is further afield? And how might political context condition the influence of

experts? Communities of international policy experts rely on publishing op-eds, letter-writing campaigns, surveys of expert communities, and buying ads in major newspapers to bring attention to the consensus views of policy experts. Past work suggests that these efforts can be effective (Guisinger and Saunders 2017), but less is known about how the public weighs the judgments of international policy experts against the views of partisan political leaders.

In this paper, we use a pre-registered, scenario-based survey experiment fielded to 3,500 Americans to explore the question of how expert cues interact with those from partisan political actors to shape public support for international cooperation.¹ We study how public support for hypothetical multilateral agreements in the areas of trade, security, and climate varies in response to endorsements and/or denouncements from international policy experts, partisan political leaders, or both. By manipulating whether respondents learn about the views of either experts, political leaders, or both, as well as whether the elites support or oppose the agreement, we can learn about the effect of expert and political cues in isolation and, crucially, in context. While our vignettes focus on international agreements, we believe our argument is generalizable and that our results would be similar if we had focused instead on the creation of a new international organization (IO)—which, of course, are created via international treaties—and/or efforts to affect public support for an existing IO.

Five key findings emerge from our analysis. First, on average, cues from knowledge experts can move the public at least as much as cues from political elites. Second, domain-relevant knowledge can make expert endorsements more powerful than otherwise identical endorsements from experts without domain-relevant expertise. Third, cues denouncing proposed

¹ We focus on the United States because of its outsized importance in world affairs, but we anticipate that the results are likely to travel well to other democracies (see Bassan-Nygate et al., 2024 for an overview of the generalizability of results from IR survey experiments based on samples from the United States to other democracies).

agreements are generally more potent than otherwise identical cues from the same actors endorsing the policy. Indeed, the largest treatment effects we observed involve a denouncement from experts combined with a denouncement from a partisan political leader. Fourth, we document important counterbalancing effects when knowledge and political elites disagree on the wisdom or folly of a given agreement and reinforcing effects when the experts and political elites agree. Since the public rarely hears expert cues in isolation from political or partisan cues, even on foreign policy issues like the decision to enter into the JCPOA and other international agreements, understanding these effects is crucial to understanding both the political context of expert cues and the effects of those cues on public perceptions of international agreements.

Finally, and relatedly, we find that messages from co-partisan elites are particularly powerful, but this party match effect is concentrated among Republicans. Among Republicans who receive cues from political elites identified as Democrats, we observe evidence consistent with reactive devaluation—movement away from a proposal, particularly if it comes from an opponent (Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Ross 1995). This suggests a structural disadvantage for Democratic presidents pursuing new international cooperative endeavors. Because Republican voters react against endorsements from Democratic leaders, but there is no parallel effect for Democratic voters, Republican leaders may draw support for new international initiatives from bipartisan coalitions of voters, while Democratic leaders may need to rely more heavily on support from voters in their own party. This likely makes international policy change harder to secure *ex-ante* and lowers the perceived legitimacy of the resulting policy *ex-post*. Our research thus documents an important place for knowledge elites in our understanding of the effect of public opinion on international agreements, but it also highlights the potential for political actors

and the public to strategically invoke or discount expertise in pursuit of their desired policy goals or to simply express their partisan or ideological identity.

These results have important implications for the study of public opinion and the domestic politics of international cooperation. First, our results show that even in the period in which international cooperation (DeVries et al. 2021, Dellmuth and Tallberg 2020), and even expertise (Nichols 2011), are contested by domestic political elites, knowledge experts can contribute to national policy debates. Communities of experts regularly exercise agency in policy debates. Our results suggest that their efforts are not wasted.

At the same time, we contribute to a growing body of work that documents the influence of public opinion on foreign policy, including decision making related to international treaties and organizations (Dellmuth 2018, De Vries, Hobolt, and Walter 2021, Spilker, Nguyen, and Bernauer 2020, Hobolt and De Vries 2016, and Hobold 2016). Our findings suggest that the public's views on international cooperation are the product, at least in part, of public conversations at the elite level. When those conversations turn negative, the public is especially likely to react against international cooperation. In this paper, we provide causally identified tests of mechanisms by which elites seek to legitimize and delegitimize IOs (see Chapman 2009, Zürn 2018, Tallberg and Zurn 2019). Relatedly, we show that the well-documented gap between elites' and citizens' views of IOs is likely the product, at least in part, of elite contestation. Like Dellmuth et al (2022) and Dellmuth and Tallberg (2020), we show that public support for international cooperation is the product of cross-competing inputs at a variety of levels. In this paper, we focus on the role of top-down cues from experts and partisan elites, but our analysis of how cues matter in different ways across political parties also highlights the importance of individual-level characteristics.

In addition to these contributions to the literature, our findings also have at least two significant policy implications. First, while the effects of positive cues on support for cooperation is good news for those wishing, in the words of Delmuth et al (2022), to “turn the populist tide,” our results also suggest that those wishing to reduce support for international cooperation have structural advantages. Second, our findings suggest that ongoing “public diplomacy” efforts on the part of IOs could be useful in helping sustain support for cooperation. Cohen and Powers (2024) show that signals from domestic political elites and IOs in the wake of a treaty violation have impacts of similar magnitude on public support for returning to cooperation. Together with their findings, our results suggest that IOs may be effective advocates for their own public support and legitimacy (see, however, Dellmuth and Tallberg 2020). This is increasingly important given the ease with which opponents of international cooperation appear to be able to undermine support.

The paper proceeds in five parts. First, we discuss existing work on the impact of elite cues—primarily from political leaders—on public opinion and develop the case that knowledge elites also matter. Second, we highlight the need to study expert cues in their political context, outline the hypotheses that motivate our experiment on the domestic politics of international cooperation, and briefly discuss the problem that the strategic use of expertise by partisan and knowledge elites poses for our study. Third, we describe our survey and experimental design. Fourth, we present the results of the survey before concluding with a discussion of the findings and their implications for research and practice.

Elites Cues and Public Opinion on Foreign Policy

Scholars have long considered the question of what shapes public opinion on foreign policy. Early studies of American public opinion (e.g., Lippman 1955; Almond 1950) generally concluded that foreign policy on mass opinion was volatile and inconsistent. More systematic and recent work describes a public that updates its foreign policy attitudes more or less in response to information about events in world affairs (e.g., Mueller 1973, Shapiro and Page 1988; Holsti 1992; Alrdich et al 1989). Still, the general public exhibits a relative lack of interest in and knowledge of policy, especially foreign policy (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991). Instead, members of the public often rely on cues from elites, either directly or mediated through the news media, to form their foreign policy views (i.e., Zaller 1992; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Cohen 2003; Berinsky 2009; Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2023). This is particularly true in the case of complicated policy issues (Nicholson 2011).

Ordinary citizens find themselves in a double informational bind when facing international issues: they are disadvantaged relative to policy elites both in the stock of information they possess about world affairs and the flow of new information about an unfolding crisis, proposed policy, or IO (Dellmuth 2016). Elite cues provide an information shortcut or heuristic device to help poorly informed citizens form opinions and make good decisions on foreign policy issues (e.g., Zaller 1992; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). As Berinsky (2009) notes about the US public's response to the deaths of US military personnel in foreign wars, "In the aggregate, the public may appear 'rational,' but only because it takes cues from elites who sensibly incorporate diplomatic actions and events on the battlefield into their decisions to support or oppose war." In other words, members of the public take their cues from elites to reduce the costs of information gathering.

Not all cues are equal, however. To be effective, cues must come from credible sources (Druckman 2001; Kahan et al. 2011; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2021; Schlipphak, Meiners, and Osman 2022). The credibility of elite cues, and therefore their potential to influence opinion depends on the perceived commonality of interest between the cue-giver and the recipient and/or the perceived expertise of the cue-giver (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). This leads us to ask which elites matter and which—partisan leaders or knowledge experts—have a greater influence on public opinion.

Partisan Elites

Decades of public opinion research show that cues from partisan elites shape public opinion (e.g., Zaller 1992), even on foreign policy (e.g., Cavari and Freedman 2019). This process may only be intensified by the increasing polarization of American politics (Druckman et al. 2013). In democratic political systems, membership in political parties provides a powerful signal of common values, beliefs, and interests, since by design parties are intended to represent groups of interests. For this reason, partisan cues provide the kind of shortcut that informationally disadvantaged citizens need to formulate policy preferences on foreign policy issues (Guisinger and Saunders 2017) and, specifically, on support for IOs (Steenbergen et al., 2007; Maier, Adam and Maier 2012; Dür and Schlipphak 2020). A partisan affinity between the source and receiver of a cue provides information on what others who share their partisan and/or ideological views, but have access to more information, believe about an issue.

At the same time, partisan cues sometimes fail to have their intended effect. Some students of public opinion have noted a “backfire” or “backlash” effect in which individuals move, not in the direction of elite cues, but away from them (Bolsen and Druckman 2018; Lupia

1994; Merkley and Stecula 2021; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Zhou 2016). Backfire effects raise the possibility that cues may have polarizing effects. “[T]he very offer of a particular proposal or concession—especially if the offer comes from an adversary—may diminish its apparent value or attractiveness in the eyes of the recipient” (Ross 1995). Brutger (2021) finds evidence for “reactive devaluation” (Ross 1995) or “partisan resistance” (Zaller 1992) in levels of public support for international agreements; a portion of the public discounts foreign leaders’ proposals relative to identical proposals made by a U.S. president. Recent research (Guess and Coppock 2018) suggests, however, that such backfire effects may be relatively rare. Dür and Schlipphak (2021) find, for example, that only in experimental treatments claiming support for TTIP by Spain’s Popular Party (PP) or Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) do supporters of other parties decrease their approval of TTIP.

Knowledge Elites

Political leaders are not the only elites who seek to sway public opinion. Less attention has been paid to the role of experts or knowledge elites—scientists, academics, or researchers with specialized knowledge of a particular subject—who often seek to influence public opinion on international issues. There is reason to believe that they can succeed, at least under some conditions.

A recent but growing literature explores the impact of knowledge elites on public opinion.² Much of this work investigates public attitudes on scientific issues, especially climate change, and the effect of communications about scientific consensus on citizens’ views. For the most part, the experimental evidence from these studies reveals that expert cues increase public

² For the intellectual roots of some of this literature, see work on epistemic communities (e.g., Haas 1992).

awareness of scientific consensus and shape policy preferences on climate change (e.g., Malka et al. 2009; van der Linden 2015; Bolsen and Druckman 2016), but some scholars are beginning to extend this analysis to other issues like vaccine use (Kerr and van der Linden 2022).³ Still, there is limited research within the social sciences on the impact of knowledge elites on policy (exceptions include Bullock 2011; Nicholson 2011; Johnston and Ballard 2016), especially within the areas of foreign policy and international cooperation (exceptions include Guisinger and Saunders 2017; Maliniak et al. 2020).

Members of the public may shift their views in response to expert cues because they believe that elites have knowledge that allows them to understand the consequences of different policies and make informed decisions. These elites may be publicly identified as the authors of relevant books or articles, as holding advanced degrees, or as being affiliated with a prestigious, issue-specific think tank, research institute, or academic department at a college or university. Such markers help establish that the individual has specialized and credible knowledge about the topic at hand and is using that knowledge to inform their commentary or recommendations. These markers also help indicate that the expert is independent and not on the take; they are endorsing or denouncing a given policy because objective research suggests they should, not because doing so would benefit them, their party, or their donors.

At least three characteristics of expert cues are important for understanding their impact. First, the degree of expert consensus affects the ability of knowledge elites to influence citizens' views on international cooperation issues. Most of the experimental evidence for the influence of knowledge elites on public opinion comes not from the cues of individual experts but from information about expert consensus (e.g., Bolsen and Druckman 2018; Johnston and Ballard

³ A smaller set of studies finds that individuals' beliefs about scientific consensus and therefore their policy views are shaped by their (largely partisan) values (e.g., Kahan et al. 2011).

2016; Kahan 2013). In a study of the effect of academic knowledge on foreign policy decision makers, researchers Avey et al. (2022) find support for the claim that consensus matters. In two experiments, Avey et al. (2022) observed that increasing levels of expert consensus in favor of a particular foreign policy made practitioners substantially more likely to support that policy.

Second, there is some evidence to suggest that members of the public look for domain-relevant expertise as they consider how to respond to expert cues. Citizens update more when learning that economists oppose a trade agreement, according to Maliniak et al. (2020), than when learning that climate scientists oppose the same agreement. Similarly, the researchers find that, when considering whether to support the Paris Climate Agreement, the public was most sensitive to the views of climate scientists' views, while cues from IR and economics experts had less effect on public opinion.

Finally, the valence of the cue matters, regardless of whether the cue comes from a partisan or knowledge elite. We know that people tend to prioritize negative information over positive information (Soroka 2006; 2014). Among many potential reasons for this phenomenon, economists and political scientists (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; McDermott 2004) focus on people's proclivity for risk-seeking behavior to avoid losses but risk-aversion to achieving gains. That is, people weigh gains and losses differently, and they seek to avoid the negative outcome of losses, even in the area of foreign policy (Jentleson 1992; Perla 2011). For this reason, we anticipate that the influence of experts and political elites alike will be greater when they oppose a particular proposal than when they support it.

Knowledge Elites in Political Context

We test whether knowledge elites, not just political elites, shape public opinion on international cooperation, but we know that neither partisan nor expert cues occur in isolation. The public may be on the receiving end of cues from both experts and political elites at the same time. In an important study, Guisinger and Saunders (2017) use survey experiments to study how attaching partisan affiliations to expert cues on nine real-world policies affects the relative power of such cues. They assign expert and partisan identities to the *same* individuals, however, and both the identity of the experts and the valence of the cues they provide vary in idiosyncratic ways across the issue areas they study, making it difficult to ascertain whether the issue area dynamics they document arise because of variation in features of the issue area, the experts, or the valence of the expert cues.

Other work focuses on the role of experts and partisan political elites or on the valence of cues but does not study the two together. Maliniak et al. (2020) find, for example, that expert denunciations have greater impact than do expert endorsements, but they do not study the interaction of expert and partisan cues. For his part, Darmofal (2005) finds that members of the public are more likely to disagree with experts when partisan and knowledge elites disagree, but he does not compare endorsements and denunciations.

To effectively determine whether and when expert cues influence public opinion on international agreements, we examine different types of expert and partisan cues both independently and in combination. After independently testing the effect of knowledge elites generally—including experts with varying types of knowledge—and knowledge elites with knowledge specific to the domain in question, in particular, and political elites generally and co-

partisan political elites more specifically, we look at the interaction of cues from these two types of elites. In sum, we test the following six hypotheses:⁴

Knowledge Elites (H1a): Learning that policy experts favor (oppose) a given international agreement will increase (decrease) the willingness of the public to endorse those policies.

Domain Relevance (H1b): The public will respond more dramatically to experts with domain-specific knowledge than to those without domain-specific knowledge.

Political Elites (H2a) : Endorsements (denouncements) from political elites will increase (decrease) the willingness of the public to support these policies.

Co-partisanship (H2b): Endorsements (denouncements) from political elites will have the largest effect when the respondent is of the same political party as the treatment elite.

Cues in Political Context (H3a): Expert endorsements (denouncements) will have the largest effects when they are consistent with the endorsement of political elites.

Cues in Co-Partisan Context (H3b): Expert endorsements (denouncements) will have the largest effects when they are consistent with the endorsement of political elites from the respondent's own political party.

Before testing these hypotheses, we briefly address a challenge to studying the impact of expert cues in a political context and, more generally, of using observational data to study the effects of elite cues.

Strategic Behavior of Political and Knowledge Elites

⁴ Note that for presentational reasons we renumbered our hypotheses and made small changes to the prose from our pre-analysis plan.

Part of the difficulty of studying the relative influence of expert cues on public opinion about foreign policy derives from the fact that both political and knowledge elites are strategic actors who may use experts and expertise for political ends. Political elites' advocacy of foreign policy initiatives often features direct references to the views of knowledge elites in one of several ways. First, partisan actors often go out of their way to highlight their alignment with experts when it exists. President Obama (2014), for example, invoked expert consensus on climate change in his 2014 State of the Union Address. Second, in contrast, partisan elites may strategically omit references to experts, dismiss experts' views, or deny that experts agree on an issue. President Trump's mention of climate change experts, for instance, differed markedly from that of his predecessor. Trump sought to cast doubt on expert consensus on the relationship between the increasing incidence of wildfires and climate change by saying, "I don't think science knows, actually" (Lemire et al. 2020). Finally, partisan elites may strategically select, or "cherry pick," experts who lack domain-relevant expertise but are willing to publicly endorse the political elite's preferred policy. The interaction of partisan elite and knowledge elite cues—especially the strategic use of tactics like association, denial, and cherry picking—make it difficult to judge from observational studies the extent to which partisan and expert cues are effective.

Political elites are not the only strategic actors; knowledge elites also strategically inject their beliefs into public debates. Experts on foreign and international policy often issue community-level endorsements or denouncements of key foreign policy initiatives. These may come in the form of joint communiqués, broad open letters, or community-wide surveys. Perhaps because their area of expertise is so often the target of misinformation campaigns led by political elites, climate scientists also routinely issue joint statements and open letters on the dangers of anthropogenic climate change. Some scientific societies also have issued statements or reports

affirming the scientific consensus on this issue (Scientific Consensus, n.d.). In many cases, however, groups of climate experts seek to mobilize the public directly. In a recent open letter to the *New York Times*, for example, 130 climate experts documented important errors and omissions in a 2020 column on climate change by a conservative commentator and asked members of the public to sign a petition (Climate Facts First. 2020).

Another increasingly common effort involves the use of expert surveys. The University of Chicago US Economic Experts Panel frequently surveys academic economists and former economic policy makers on key questions of national and international economic policy, and results are routinely cited in major news outlets. The Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) Project at William & Mary's Global Research Institute also regularly surveys all IR scholars in the United States on their views on major foreign and international policy debates and circulates the results through major media and policy outlets.

These examples of political elites' selective use of expert knowledge and experts' strategic decisions to enter the political fray suggest both the prominence of expert opinion in public debates and the challenges of studying the interaction of partisan and expert cues observationally. They also highlight, however, the need to understand the impact of expert cues, alone and in combination with partisan cues, on public opinion.

Experimental Design

The kind of strategic selection described above makes studying the effects of expert endorsements and partisan cues difficult using observational data. As such, we turn to experiments to credibly identify the causal effects of each set of cues and explore their potential interaction, which we summarize in Figure 1.

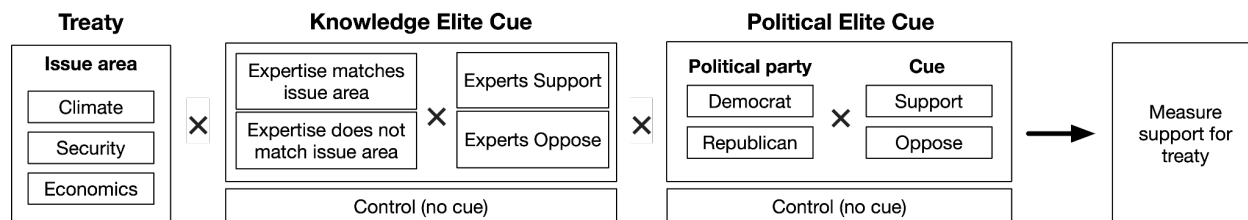


Figure 1: *Study Design*



Figure 2. *An example of the survey results viewed by respondents.*

We embedded a vignette-based experiment in a survey of 3,500 Americans recruited by Qualtrics and fielded between July 17 and August 13, 2018.⁵ We focus on the United States because of its influence in world affairs, but we anticipate that the results would travel well to other national contexts where experts and partisan elites can compete for mass influence in the public sphere. Indeed, while their focus is different, Dellmuth et al. (2022), show that views of IOs are remarkably stable across national contexts and issue areas and driven more by individual level dispositions than particular national features.

Although our sample is not representative of the public as a whole, we used quotas based on the U.S. census for age, gender, and location to ensure we had access to a diverse cross-

⁵ See Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz (2012) and Coppock and McClellan (2019) for discussion of the promise of online convenience samples. They show that such samples return estimated treatment effects of similar magnitude and direction as those observed in samples recruited using more traditional methods.

section of the US public.⁶ The experiment is designed to allow us to observe how public support for international agreements varies in response to support for or opposition to the agreements by experts and/or political leaders. All respondents read the following common introduction:

In the next section, we will present you with information about three hypothetical international agreements on three different issue areas. These are general scenarios about hypothetical agreements the United States may consider joining in the future. They are not about any specific agreements you may have heard about in the news. Please read the details of each scenario carefully, afterwards we will ask for your opinion regarding each agreement.

Note that while we described the scenarios as hypothetical from the outset to avoid the use of deception, we also debriefed respondents at the end of the survey. In the debrief, we explained again that the survey results and political leaders' arguments were fictitious. In addition, we explained why we used fictitious information and provided links to reputable sources, so that interested respondents could learn more about experts' actual views on these policy issues.⁷ We described to respondents a hypothetical international agreement in one of three issue areas (trade, climate, security), characterized for respondents the level of support the agreement enjoys among experts and/or partisan political leaders, and then asked respondents to report their level of support for the hypothetical agreement. Each respondent completed a version of the vignette experiment three times, one for each issue area. We structured the vignettes in the

⁶ The distribution of age, gender, location, and income is presented in Table 1 of the Appendix.

⁷ The full debrief is available in the appendix. Some readers may wonder how the use of hypothetical scenarios affects the validity of the experimental results. Recent work suggests that the effect sizes are not significantly altered by labeling a scenario as “hypothetical” relative to labeling it as “real” or not labeling it at all (Brutger et al 2022). We note too that our scenarios were crafted with an eye towards mundane realism, using figures and phrases that a respondent might actually encounter in real news coverage.

following way. First, we outlined the agreement in general terms and implied that the future of the agreement is still uncertain. This portion of the vignette read:

The U.S. Congress is currently debating whether or not to approve a new international [**climate change/security/trade agreement**]. The agreement is between the United States and a number of other countries. It is designed to help the member countries [**slow down climate change/promote peace and security/promote economic exchange**].

Second, we randomly assigned respondents to one of several treatment groups, which received information about experts' views on the agreement, or to a control group, which received no information about experts' views. In the treatment groups, respondents learned whether experts supported or opposed the agreements. We randomly varied both the experts' subject-matter expertise and whether they were overwhelmingly supportive or overwhelmingly opposed to the proposed agreement. This portion of the vignette read:

A reputable national news magazine recently published an article reporting the results of a survey showing that scholars of [**climate change/international trade/international security**] at U.S. colleges and universities are [**overwhelmingly opposed to/overwhelmingly in favor of**] the U.S. approving the trade agreement. The result of the survey is shown below.

We reinforced this information by presenting respondents with the results of fictitious surveys in a graph like that displayed in Figure 2. We manipulated the graphs so that each combination of level of support, issue area of agreement, and issue area of experts was consistent with the treatment assignment.

Finally, we randomly assigned respondents to one of another set of treatment groups that received information about whether political leaders supported or opposed the agreement, or to a control group that received no information about political leaders' views. Those in the treatment learned that a member of Congress (randomly identified as either Republican or Democratic) either opposed or favored the agreement because of expectations that it would or would not be effective at accomplishing its goals. We chose to focus on the views of a single political leader,

rather than a political consensus, because this is a common way in which members of the public encounter the views of government leaders in media reports. The treatments in the trade agreement condition, for example, read:

A reputable national news magazine recently published an article about the proposed trade and investment agreement. A congressional [**Democrat/Republican**] arguing [**in favor of/against**] the agreement was quoted in the article. This congressional [**Democrat/Republican**] argued that the agreement would [**increase/decrease**] unemployment levels and [**increase/decrease**] wages in the United States.

Immediately following treatment, we measured support for the agreement by asking, “Do you support or oppose the United States joining the pending [climate change/security/trade] agreement?” Respondents indicated their level of support on a seven-point scale from “oppose a great deal” to “support a great deal,” with a “neither support nor oppose” option in the middle. We also asked respondents two questions about the expected effect of the agreement, one about whether they expected the agreement to be good or bad for them personally and another asking if it would be good or bad for the country as a whole. As Figure 1 and the subsequent discussion reveal, this design is high-dimensional. To maximize our statistical power, we focus our tests on contrasts that are most relevant to our hypotheses, while averaging over other aspects of the experiment.⁸ For example, when we test H1, we focus on the average effect of experts supporting or opposing a given agreement while averaging over the specific issue area.

Results

Effect of expert cues on support for cooperation

⁸ Our most disaggregated analysis of main effects includes approximately 140 respondents per cell. Assuming effect sizes similar to those of Maliniak et al. 2020, we estimated that 125 respondents per cell is sufficient to achieve power of 0.8.

We begin by estimating the main effect of exposure to expert endorsements or denouncements on support for the proposed agreement relative to a control condition that did not expose respondents to any cues (**H1a**). Recall that each respondent participated in three rounds of the experiment (one for each issue area) in random order. We pool the responses and estimate treatment effects relative to the pure control baseline (i.e., no cues from either political or knowledge elites) with standard errors clustered by respondent. The results presented graphically in Figure 3 show that the *Experts Support* treatment had a small positive but statistically insignificant effect on support for the agreement (.06, $p = .491$), while the *Experts Oppose* treatment had a large and negative effect (-.73 points on our 7-point scale, $p < .000$). The negative effect is equivalent to about a 17-percent reduction (95%: 11.8, 22.0; $p < .000$) in support for the agreement.⁹ We take these results as qualified support for **H1a**. Experts can have important effects on public support for international cooperation, but it is expert opposition to proposed agreements that is likely to be most salient and powerful.

As we note above, the null effects we observe among the positive endorsements could stem from several sources. First, they may be the result of ceiling effects; that is, a large proportion of the respondents may have come into the experiment ready to support any international agreement, so it would not be possible to induce an increase in support relative to the control group. Our results suggest that this is unlikely, since the average level of support for the international agreements in the control group was 5.2 (95% CI: 5.07, 5.36), giving us nearly 2 full points of headroom on our 7-point scale to observe movement if the positive treatments were effective. Second, the null result could reflect respondents' pre-existing beliefs that policy

⁹ To report percentage changes in support, we collapse our measure of support into a binary variable, with responses above 4 ("neither support nor oppose") indicating support and responses below that indicating opposition or indifference to the agreement in question.

experts would support any international agreement, so the treatments provided no additional information to respondents. We do not have the data needed to test directly for this effect, but, as we note above, this explanation is unsatisfying. Many respondents may have anticipated that climate experts would support nearly any climate agreement, but it is far less likely that the public would expect the same level of support among trade or security experts for a climate treaty. And, as we see later in our discussion, domain-relevant expertise matters in ways that this “no additional information” hypothesis does not anticipate: When experts with domain-relevant expertise endorse an agreement, the public increases their support. If the “no additional information” argument were correct, we should see a null effect instead (since it is these experts, with domain relevant expertise, who the public would view as most likely to endorse such the agreement in the first place). Finally, as Tables 5 and 6 in the appendix show, we have no evidence to suggest that the treatments were any more salient conditional on the experts acting “against type.” If anything, they were less so. We thus take the heterogeneous treatment effect across positive and negative cues from experts as evidence of the presence of negativity bias in which respondents are more sensitive to denouncements than they are to endorsements, though the precise mechanisms driving that bias cannot be determined using our present experimental design. We see a similar asymmetry below in our analysis of cues from political elites. Importantly, the null effect is not the result of respondents being unable to recall the level of expert endorsement.¹⁰

Figure 3: *Effect of knowledge elite cues*

¹⁰ In the Appendix, we show that recall rates for the level of expert support/opposition to the agreement were high (around 61 percent on average across the three experiments). If respondents answered our recall question at random, we would expect a recall rate of 25 percent.

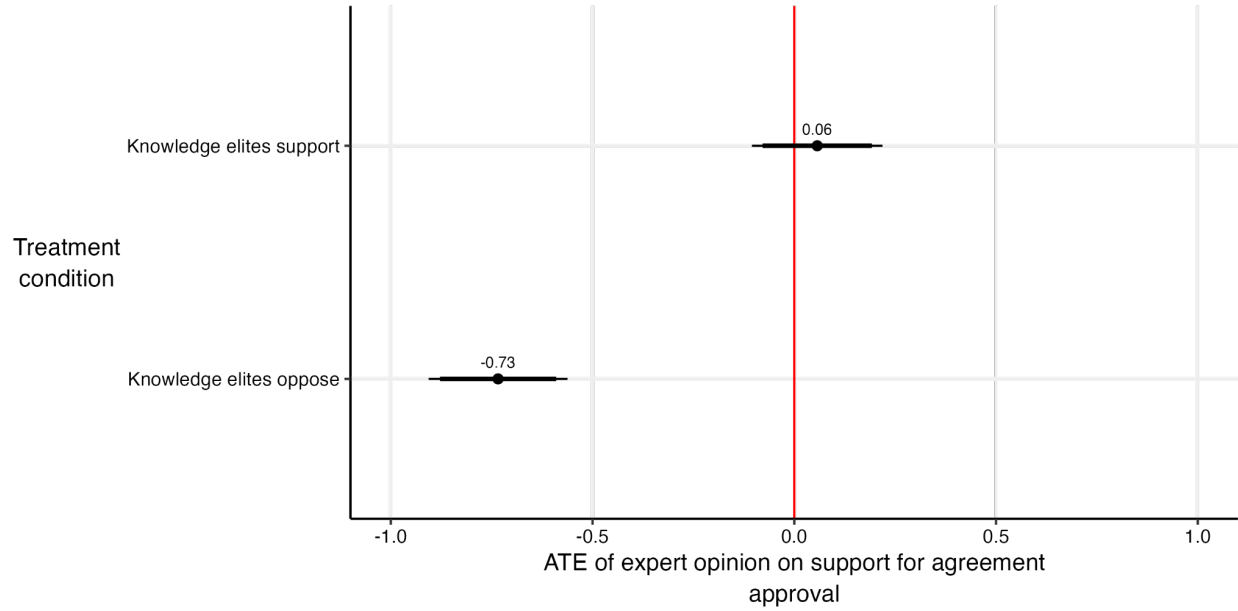
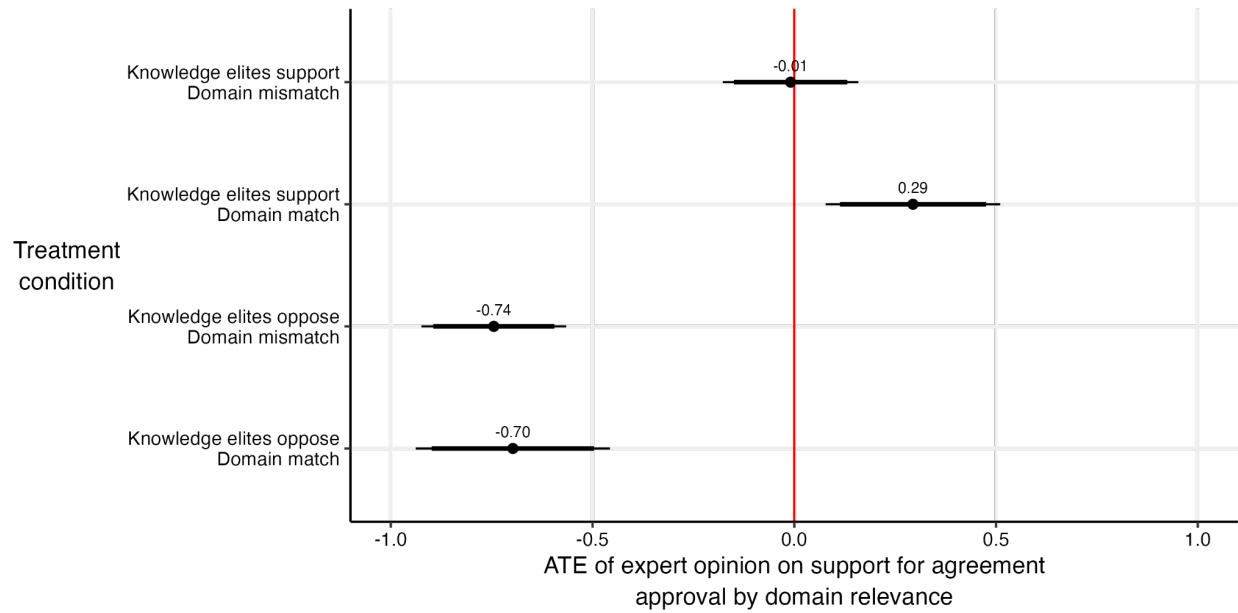


Figure 4: *Effect of domain-relevant expertise*



Is the effect of expert cues moderated by domain relevance?

To investigate whether the public updates more significantly in response to cues from domain-specific experts, we recode the knowledge elite treatments as coming from experts who either have or do not have knowledge relevant to the substantive issue of the treaty under consideration¹¹ We again estimate treatment effects using OLS and present the results in Figure 4. They provide qualified support for **H1b**.

Those who received the *Knowledge Elites Oppose* treatment from experts with domain-relevant expertise were about .74 points (95% CI: .57, .93; $p < .000$) less supportive of the treaty on our 7-point scale relative to a pure control condition in which respondents were exposed to either no knowledge or political elite cues. The treatment effect among those who received the same treatment but from experts with expertise particular to the substantive issue area of the treaty under consideration was of a nearly identical magnitude. They were about .7 points (95% CI: .46, .94; $p < .000$) less supportive of the treaty on our 7-point scale. The difference between these two is not statistically significant, suggesting that respondents were not more swayed by a cue from experts with directly relevant knowledge. As above, these differences are both roughly equivalent to a 17-percentage-point drop in support, measured as a binary indicator, for the proposed treaty.

Turning our attention to the *Knowledge Elites Support* treatments, we see that cues from those with directly relevant knowledge increase support for the treaty by about .29 points (95% CI: .07, .51; $p = .007$), while cues from those without directly relevant knowledge had no discernible effect on treaty support (-.01 points on our 7-point scale; 95% CI: -.18, .16). In contrast to the null effect of domain-relevant knowledge in the *Knowledge Elites Oppose* conditions, domain-relevant knowledge appears to play an important role when it comes to

¹¹ In the appendix, we show that respondents perceive economists to be more knowledgeable on trade, climate scholars on climate, and security scholars on international security issues.

endorsements. Domain-relevant knowledge increases the effect of the *Knowledge Elites Endorse* treatment by .303 points (95% CI: .12, .49) on our 7-point scale. This effect is statistically significant ($p=.001$), but perhaps only marginally so in substantive terms. Endorsements from knowledge elites with domain-relevant expertise increase support by about 5 percentage points relative to endorsements from knowledge elites without such expertise. As we show in the Appendix, recall rates for the issue area of experts was about 50-55 percent on average, suggesting that this feature of the treatment was not overwhelmingly salient to many respondents. We take these results as qualified support for **H1b** but note that more research is needed on this front.

Domain-relevant expertise appears to be an advantage in the case of endorsements, but there are no analogous effects in the case of denouncements, suggesting that negativity bias is the driving force in that setting. Expressions of opposition from any quarter of expertise can erode support for new international treaties. These results suggest a structural advantage for those opposed to new international cooperation initiatives both because oppositional cues from experts appear strong and because domain-relevant expertise appears to be less important in this context. Only when experts are endorsing a given initiative do we find appreciable differences between those with domain-relevant expertise and those without such expertise.

Effect of cues from elected officials on support for cooperation

Thus far we have seen that the public is sensitive to experts' views but that this is much more the case when the experts announce their opposition to proposed international agreements than when they announce their support. We now assess the extent to which those effects are moderated by placing them in the context of information about the views of partisan elites. To

begin, we test for the main effect of cues from elected political elites on public support for international cooperation. Using the same strategy as above, we estimate the effect of expressions of support or opposition to a given international agreement by elected political elites relative to the pure control of no knowledge elite or political elite cues while averaging over the other treatment conditions.

Relative to the pure control, support for the proposed agreement is about the same as it was in the control condition, which provided no information about the views of members of Congress. The estimated treatment effect was .04 points on our 7-point scale (95% CI: -0.18, 0.26; $p = .701$). Consistent with our results above, only the negative cue produced meaningful changes. Relative to those in the pure control, those in the *Political Elites Oppose* treatment were .88 points (95% CI: 1.1, 0.67; $p < .000$) less supportive of the agreement compared to those in the control condition. In substantive terms, the *Political Elites Oppose* condition produced a 22-percentage-point (95% CI: -28, -16.8; $p < .000$) decline in the share of respondents reporting any level of support for the agreement. We take these results as qualified support for **H2a**.

Endorsements from elites have important effects on support for international agreements, but just as in the case of expert cues, the negative treatment has much larger effects than the otherwise identical support treatment. We summarize these results in Figure 5.¹²

¹² If the public has a pre-existing belief that policy experts would support almost any proposed international agreement, elite cues provide no new information. While it is possible that this is responsible for some of the heterogeneity we observe, there are several reasons we believe it to be a relatively minor cause. First, although it is possible that many members of the public might anticipate that climate scholars would support most climate agreements (with type), it seems unlikely that they would expect the same level of consensus support among trade or security experts for these climate agreements. Second, as we show below, the positive effect of learning about expert support for agreements when the experts in question have domain-relevant expertise suggests that the public is more rather than less sensitive to the views of those who this “no new information” hypothesis assumes would be most likely to support a given treaty ex-ante. And third, as Tables 5 and 6 in the appendix show, we find little evidence that potentially more surprising “against type” expert cues were much more likely to be recalled correctly than cues from experts that went “with type.”

Are elite cues moderated by co-partisanship?

We now examine the effect of co-partisanship. We code whether the support and oppose treatments come from the respondent's political party. Because the effect of co-partisanship may vary by political party, we analyze Democratic and Republican respondents separately. As above, we pool the experiment and our standard errors by respondent.

With a few exceptions discussed below, the results take on aspects of a now familiar pattern with endorsements having relatively little impact and denunciations having more robust effects. First, across both Democratic and Republican respondents, endorsements from co-partisan political elites have positive but statistically insignificant effects on support for the proposed agreements. Among Democratic respondents, the effect of a co-partisan political elite endorsement relative to the pure control of no political or knowledge elite cues was about .19 points (95% CI: -.21, .58; $p=.361$) on our 7-point scale. The analogous treatment effect for Republican respondents was .15 points on our 7-point scale (95% CI: -.32, .62; $p=.524$). The effects of co-partisan denunciations are much more pronounced. Again, relative to the pure control of no political or knowledge elite cues, a co-partisan denunciation lowers support for the proposed agreement by about 1.2 points (95% CI: -1.7, -.7; $p<.000$) on our 7-point scale for Democratic respondents and 1.1 points (95% CI: -1.6, -.6; $p<.000$) on our 7-point scale among Republican respondents.

The results are somewhat different when we look at cases in which respondents received cues from those outside their party. Among Democratic respondents we found that positive cues from co-partisan political elites had no effect on support for the proposed agreements, and this sub-sample was equally indifferent when the cue came from a Republican political elite.¹³

¹³ One potential explanation for this is that the public perceives Democratic politicians as more likely to favor international cooperation (Kertzer, Brooks, and Brooks 2021). Thus, as respondents react more strongly to

Republican respondents were similarly unmoved by cues of support from members of their own party, but they do appear to rebel against endorsements from Democratic political elites. Compared to the pure control with cues from neither political elites nor knowledge elites, Republican respondents exposed to a positive cue from a Democratic political elite were .67 points (95% CI: -1.28, -.06, $p=.032$) on our 7-point scale less supportive of the agreement. Among Democratic respondents, negative cues from Republican political elites were just about as effective as those from Democratic political elites, lowering support for the proposed agreement by about 1 point (95% CI: -1.5, -.65; $p<.000$). Among Republicans the story is somewhat different: learning that Democratic political elites oppose the agreement lowers support by about .5 points (95% CI: -.95, 0; $p=.047$) on our 7-point scale. Figure 6 summarizes these results.¹⁴

Figure 5: *Effect of cues from political elites*

unexpected information (e.g., Baker and Petty 1994; Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991), cues that a Democratic politician supports international cooperation does not lead to a large increase in support even among co-partisans, however, among Republicans learning that a Democratic politician opposes an agreement results in a reduction in support. This result is in line with other findings that individuals typically respond more strongly to denouncements than endorsements from elite cue-givers (Soroka, 2014; Soroka, Fournier, and Nir 2019; Maliniak et al. 2020). This also suggests something of a disadvantage for Democratic politicians in promoting public support for international agreements.

¹⁴ Pooled results for party matching for both Democrats and Republicans are shown in SI Figure 3.

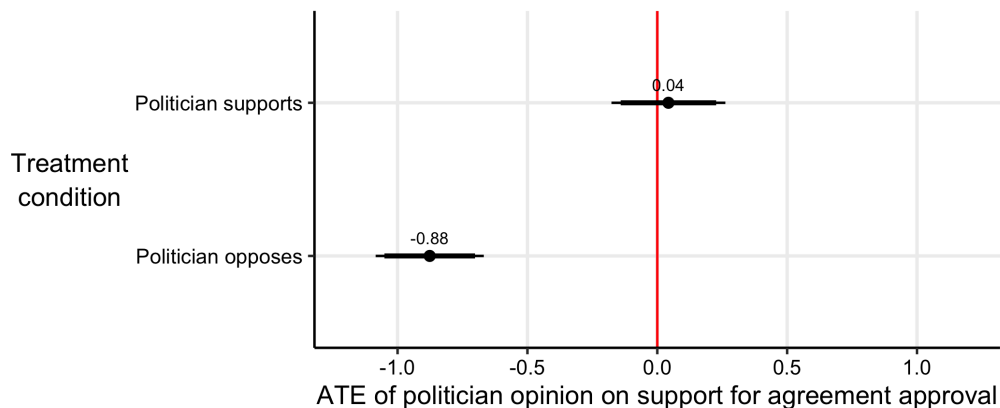
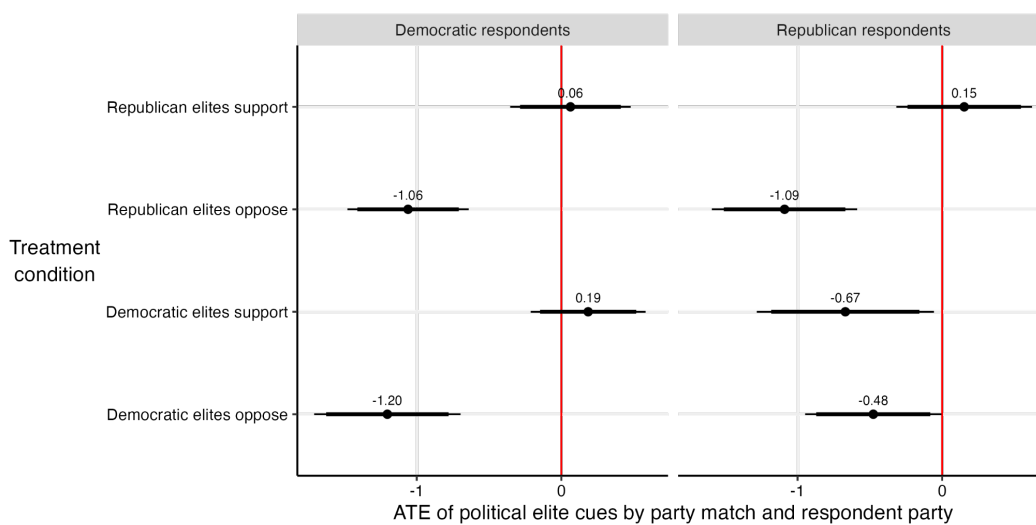


Figure 6: *Effect of cues from political elites by respondent party*



Although we see no evidence of co-partisan effects among Democratic respondents, among Republican respondents we see evidence that party matters. In the *Political Elites Support* condition, the effect among Republicans of the party cue was about .83 points (95% CI: .2, 1.5; $p = .01$) on our 7-point scale. At about .6 points (95% CI: 1.3, .04; $p = .03$) in the political elites oppose condition, this co-partisanship effect is smaller but still statistically significant at conventional levels. These results suggest qualified support for **H3b** but suggest a structural advantage for Republican political elites who seek to advocate for their preferred cooperative

international policies. These results also suggest that Republicans may reactively devalue proposals associated with Democratic political leaders.¹⁵

Expert cues in political context

Having observed the effects of cues from knowledge elites and political elites respectively, we now can study their interaction. Above, we draw on the elite cueing literature to motivate our expectations about how the public will temper its response to experts' views in the context of counter endorsements by partisan elites. At the same time, we suggest that the opposite might occur when knowledge elites and political elites' endorsements align. Our results, presented in Figure 5, are consistent with that expectation from **H3a**. We see a stepwise increase from oppose-oppose to support-support. The most extreme effects obtain when experts and political elites are united in their support for or opposition to a given treaty. In the former case, support for the treaty increases by about .17 points (95% CI: .01, .33; $p=.033$) on our 7-point scale, while in the latter support for the treaty declines by just over 1 point (95% CI: .911, 1.26; $p<.000$). Effects are more modest when knowledge elites and political elites cross paths, but given the negativity bias documented above, on balance these mixed signals reduce support. When experts support but political elites oppose, support declines by about .33 points (95% CI: .16, .5; $p<.000$) on our 7-point scale. Support declines by about .47 points (95% CI: .30, .65; $p<.000$) in the case where knowledge elites oppose, but political elites support. The .15 point (95% CI: .01, .30; $p = .03$) difference between these two effects implies that the public weighs the views of knowledge elites more heavily when presented alongside competing cues from a

¹⁵ Brutger (2021) shows that Republican members of the public reactively devalue international agreements when they are proposed by foreign leaders. Here, we identify a similar effect when the proposal is linked to Democrats. As Ross (1995) notes, such proposals are devalued because "the offer comes from an adversary." Such reactive devaluation may be more common when negative partisanship is high (Abramowitz and Webster 2018).

political leader. The difference in relative weight is not substantively large, but considering how powerful past research judges partisan cues to be, the relative importance given to knowledge elites in this context is remarkable. Notably, here too, we identify a negativity bias: as soon as any negative cue is offered from any source, support for the proposed agreement declines substantially.

Most important for theories of epistemic influence on public opinion, we see that knowledge elites have important and independent effects on support for international policy proposals. To see this, consider the effect of moving from the case in which knowledge elites and political elites oppose an agreement to the case in which political elites remain opposed, but knowledge elites now favor the agreement (see Figure 7). Support for the treaty increases by .76 points (95% CI: .6, .9; $p < .000$). In substantive terms, this means that the proportion of respondents expressing any level of support for the agreement increases by about 18 percentage points. We observe effects of similar magnitude when moving from the case in which both knowledge elites and political elites support the agreement to the case in which knowledge elites oppose the treaty in the face of political elite support; support for the agreement declines by .65 points (95% CI: .52, .78; $p < .000$). This represents a 15-percentage-point drop in the share of respondents who express any level of support for the agreement. Experts appear to have important effects on public opinion even in the context of cues from political elites, in effect discounting the impact of negative cues from political elites.

Figure 7: *Joint effect of cues from knowledge and political elites*

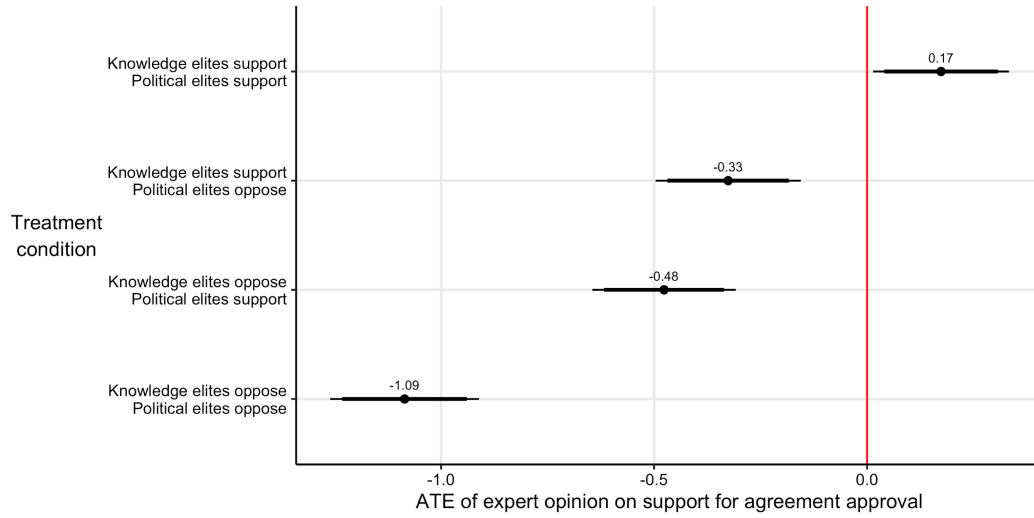
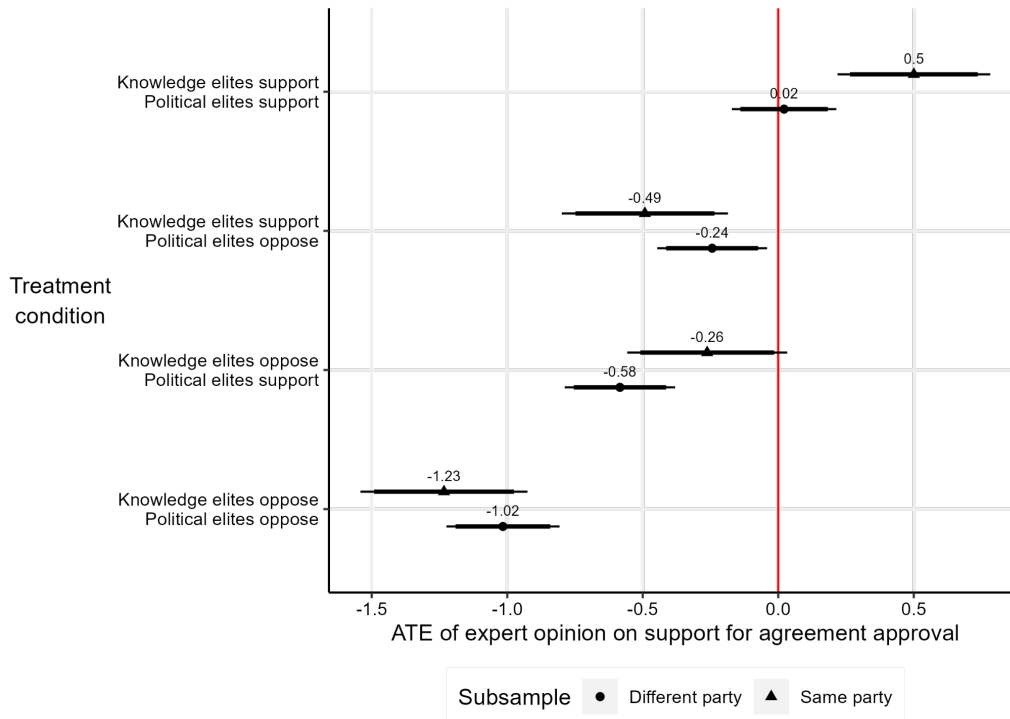


Figure 8: *Joint effect of cues from knowledge and political elites by co-partisanship*



We can gain additional insight by comparing the effect of these combined cues when the cue from political elites comes from a member of the respondent’s own political party. We

present these results in Figure 8. They suggest support for the contention that expert cues will be most persuasive when combined with matching cues from political elites in the same party as the respondent (**H3b**). We see that the joint effect of support or opposition among both knowledge and political elites is strongest when the political elite is identified as a member of the respondent's own party. Indeed, this analysis reveals that an increase in support for a treaty in the wake of an endorsement cue from both political elites and knowledge elites is driven almost entirely by a co-partisan effect. The cue loses its power for respondents when it comes from political elites on the other side of the aisle.

We see evidence that respondents privilege cues from their own party more than cues from experts. Consider the case of the combination of the *Knowledge Elites Support* and *Political Elites Oppose*. In this case, a partisan political elite cue decreases support for the treaty by about .49 points (95% CI: .19, .79; $p < .000$) on our 7-point scale. The same cue from political elites from the opposite party decreases support for the agreement by only .24 points (95% CI: .04, .45; $p = .02$). We see a similar effect in the context of the joint *Knowledge Elites Oppose* and *Political Elites Support* treatment. Those who received the co-partisan political elite cue are less swayed by experts' opposition than those exposed to a non-co-partisan political elite cue.

Discussion

Our findings suggest an important role for experts in shaping support for international treaties and organizations. As others (Guisinger and Saunders 2017; Chaudoin 2014; Maliniak et al. 2020) previously have documented, the public is responsive to cues from policy experts and political elites. We build on these past results by showing that expressions of opposition from experts are more powerful cues than endorsements, providing new evidence of a negativity bias

in the effect of elite cues on public support for proposed policies (Soroka 2014). This finding is important because it suggests a structural advantage for elites of all stripes who wish to forestall new cooperative endeavors. We note, however, that our experiment is not designed to shed light on the precise mechanisms driving this bias.

We also show that in isolation positive cues from knowledge elites gain traction only if they are labeled as coming from domain-relevant experts. This suggests that efforts by climate scientists, economists, and IR scholars to advocate new cooperative agreements on climate, trade and investment, or security, respectively, are likely to be salient to the public. This domain-relevance effect disappears when respondents are exposed to negative cues from knowledge elites, suggesting that efforts by political elites to co-opt knowledge elites willing to oppose a given treaty may be successful, regardless of their field of expertise.

When combined with cues from political elites, however, positive cues from knowledge elites can substantially discount the influence of negative cues from political elites. The same is true when roles are reversed and experts express opposition, thereby eroding the potential benefits of endorsements from political elites. Thus, a fundamental contribution of this paper is that we show that knowledge elites can have important effects on support for international treaties even when that support is presented alongside cues from political elites.

Our study contributes to a growing literature on the role of expert consensus and the politicization of knowledge, but our findings also have a number of potentially significant real-world implications. First, experts and political elites who oppose international policy will be structurally advantaged when their goal is to move public opinion against a given initiative. This effect is even more pronounced, because the public is less discerning about which experts are speaking, when the cue is negative. A coordinated effort by a coalition of experts and political

elites opposed to a given treaty, then, can significantly decrease support for the treaty. Second, our results suggest that Democratic political leaders who propose and support international treaties will be structurally disadvantaged relative to their Republican counterparts. Members of the general public who identify as Republicans react against proposals from Democratic leaders; we found no evidence, however, that Democrats react against similar proposals endorsed by Republican leaders. Third, the most effective way for a political leader to generate support for new international policies is to find experts with domain-relevant expertise—climate scientists on climate treaties, for example—and get them to endorse the effort. The effects may be muted in equilibrium for the reasons discussed above, but our findings suggest that such an effort would help mitigate the effect of denouncements from other elites. Finally, our findings suggest that IO staff and leaders may be important advocates within the domestic political process, given their domain-relevant knowledge of specific treaty and policy issues. They can provide important and respected voices, in short, that can help legitimize and sustain support for their organizations and for international cooperation more generally.

We have provided evidence that knowledge elites can have important effects on public support for foreign and international policy proposals, but the actual effect of such cues in the real world may be muted since a wide variety of relevant and irrelevant cues are constantly competing for public attention (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2020). It is worth remembering, however, that even if members of the public pay little mind in their day-to-day lives to expert cues, policy practitioners likely pay closer attention. In addition, the process of seeking public support for and congressional ratification of a treaty is likely to exhibit selection effects in which political leaders avoid proposing treaties that are not informed by policy experts in the first place. As such, the real world often does not generate the relevant counterfactuals for assessing just how important a

role expert endorsements or denouncements play in any given instance; smart leaders will work with knowledge elites before announcing policy, limiting the volume of denouncements, while less savvy leaders or leaders with constituencies predisposed against expert views may lock out knowledge elites and so propose policies that are more likely to invite harsh criticism from experts. In such cases, where both the policy and the strength of cues vary endogenously, separating the effect of the expert cue from, for example, the effect of the underlying policy is fraught. Finally, political elites often strategically invoke expertise to win support for their preferred policies, making it difficult to distinguish the effects of expert cues from more partisan cues provided by leaders.

This study advances our understanding of the impact of expert cues on public opinion, the interaction of expert and partisan cues, and the relative influence of elite endorsements and denouncements of policy proposals, but it also suggests several avenues for future research. Our study explores statements by groups of knowledge elites, or “epistemic communities” (Adler 1992; Haas 1992), for example, but our politician treatment invokes solitary political support rather than a unified front from a political party. Future work should explore the impact of consensus among partisan elites. Second, additional research efforts also might expand our work to explore the impact of different kinds of cues or policy frames, as well as cues from a range of different elites. In addition to knowledge and policy elites, such efforts might examine cues from celebrities—film stars or members of the Royal family, for instance—or religious leaders on public support for international policies. Third, future research should explore other citizen characteristics, in addition to their partisan affiliation, that might influence whether members of the public even view knowledge elites as experts. For example, knowledge and education levels, existing policy preferences, and other life experiences all may play a role (Darmofal 2005).

Finally, of course, subsequent research efforts might address the domestic process of building support for actual historical and contemporary international agreements and organizations, rather than restricting themselves to the use of experiments to study the effect of expert and partisan cues on public support for international cooperation. Previous work (Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014) suggests that the use of real international agreements and expert opinion about their implications might increase the effect of expert endorsements and or denouncements relative to partisan cues.

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