

The Self-Reinforcing Effects of Political Identity Based Norms

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This is an initial draft, based on a recently conducted lab experiment. It contains a short motivation for the experiment, an explanation of the research design, and initial results. It also describes an online experiment we are designing to complement the lab experiment. Any suggestions will be much appreciated.

Abstract: When choosing how to vote, individuals consider the expectations of the political groups with which they identify. These expectations are social norms, shared beliefs about what constitutes appropriate behavior for members of the identity group, and individuals' choices reflect trade-offs between adherence to these norms and their other preferences. Using an incentivized lab experiment, we show that when individuals pay a personal cost as a consequence of avoiding a group norm violation, they subsequently view the norm as stronger and become more willing to punish/reward others with the same identity for violating/complying with the norm than if they did not experience such a cost. Further, such individuals view other norms of the identity as stronger. In this way, costly compliance with a norm may have a reinforcing effect on the norms of one's identity.

Introduction

It is far from controversial to suggest that a voter's political identities affect their vote choice. The nature of this effect is somewhat more so. A political identity may be an informational cue (Downs 1957; Popkin 1991; Lau and Redlawsk 2006). It may be a perceptual screen (Taber and Lodge 2006; Redlawsk 2002). A political identity may also affect vote choice through the norms of behaviour it imparts to the individual (Suhay 2014; Pickup *et al.* 2016). This last possibility has consequences for how the effects of a political identity on vote choice may be self-reinforcing. This is what we explore with an incentivized experiment.

When we say political identities impart norms of behaviour, we mean that voters, in the voting booth, don't just ask themselves "which party represents my interests?" but also ask "how is someone like me supposed to vote?" Voters consider how members of the political groups with which they identify (partisan, ideological, etc.) are expected to behave. These expectations are norms, the rules of behaviour that we expect members of our group to follow and believe others in our group will expect us to follow in kind (Bicchieri 2006; Akerlof and Kranton 2000, 2001). However, the norms that inform an individual what policies, party or candidate one's political group is expected to support or not support often do not match the individual's personal preferences or the expectations of the individual's other identities.

For example, the identity "conservative" in the US is normatively associated with increased restrictions on abortion. Nevertheless, many individuals who identify as conservative may personally prefer restrictions not be increased. As another example, an individual may believe that as a conservative they should oppose funding for global sexual and reproductive rights programs but believe that as a woman they should support these rights for women across the globe. When such conflicts with the individual's political identity arise, voting behavior reflects this tension, with some individuals putting sufficient weight on group norms to vote against their other preferences. Individuals' vote choices thus reflect trade-offs between adherence to political norms on one hand and personal preferences and other group norms on the other (Pickup, Kimbrough and de Rooij 2016).

Under this view, when an individual privileges the group norm, this is the consequence of a trade-off between political identity norm compliance and other preferences, but it nevertheless does result in a personal cost. The consequence of incurring such a cost may be that the individual suffers from a form of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). The individual finds herself in a position of having to justify to herself why she voted to incur a cost. Therefore, when an individual experiences the cost of following the norm at the expense of her other preferences, the individual will engage in “effort justification” (Aronson and Mills 1959). This is a psychological process of reducing the cognitive dissonance associated with experiencing a cost due to a choice made. In effort justification, the individual increases the perceived value of the choice made in order to justify the cost. In this instance it is most easily done by magnifying the importance of the group and the associated norms. The result is that costly compliance with a norm can increase the strength of the group norm and increase (future) adherence to the norm itself. Thus, group norm compliance may be self-reinforcing.

Our research question then is: *What are the effects of experiencing a cost due to choosing the norm consistent option?* Our hypotheses are that: 1) *complying with a group norm at a cost reinforces that group norm;* and 2) *complying with a group norm at a cost reinforces other norms of the group.*

Research design

Our experiment is designed to test whether subjects who incur costs in order to follow an identity based norm will be more likely than those who incur no cost to support and enforce that (and other group) norms. Our experiment uses subjects’ self-reported partisan and ideological identities. It also uses our foreknowledge of the norms regarding support for (opposition toward) the Affordable Care Act and restrictions on immigration that are associated with those identities. This allows us to construct choices in which subjects face a trade-off between norm-following and their (expected) monetary earnings. Specifically, in our experiment a subject can either receive a certain payoff of \$6 for taking a norm-inconsistent

action or receive an uncertain lottery that is equally likely to pay \$6 or \$2 for taking a norm-consistent action.

Our identification strategy relies on comparisons of subjects who took norm-consistent actions and differ only in whether they received a favourable lottery outcome and/or an unfavourable lottery outcome. Those whose lottery outcomes were unfavourable suffered a cost in order to follow the norm, and thus we would expect that they are more willing to punish norm-violators, reward norm-followers and report stronger normative expectations of others.

The experiment unfolds as follows (see Table 1 for a summary). Prior to the experiment, subjects completed a questionnaire in which they indicated their partisan (or ideological identity). These experiments were conducted in the US, so we know whether subjects identify as Democrats or Republicans in the Partisanship treatment and whether they identify as liberals or conservatives in the Ideology treatment. On the basis of these self-reports, we recruited subjects to the lab and assigned them to different tasks where they answered questions and made decisions related to either the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare treatment) or immigration policy (Immigration treatment). We chose these policies because they are the focus of a salient divide between Democrats and Republicans (and between liberals and conservatives) in contemporary American politics. The choice of these policies was also informed by evidence from a population-based survey we ran showing that these are issues on which Americans have clearly differentiated expectations for liberals and conservatives.

Upon arrival to the lab, subjects confirm their self-reported identity. The experiment consists of 5 tasks, two of which are incentivized. Task 1 asks for subjects' beliefs about the extent to which other members of their own identity group would approve or disapprove if they chose to advocate for norm-inconsistent policies. We also ask how much the subject would approve or disapprove if they learned that others in their identity group advocated norm-inconsistent policies. This gives us a measure of subjects' beliefs about the norms of their identity group. For instance, in our Immigration-Partisanship treatment a self-identified Democrat would be asked how much they believe other Democrats would approve if they advocated in favour of reducing immigration. We anticipate that such advocacy will be perceived as a norm violation and thus

will result in disapproval. This task also serves to prime the individual’s political identity and the norm of the identity regarding a specific policy (a policy norm).

Table 1: Structure of the Experiment

Pre-Experiment Questionnaire	Task 1: Policy Norm Elicitation	Task 2: Letter-writing Decision	Task 3: Vote Norm Elicitation	Task 4: Incentivized Policy Norm Elicitation	Task 5: Beliefs about Others’ Norm-Following
Subjects report their partisan (ideological) identity and this is used to assign them to treatment. This occurs days before the experiment.	Subjects confirm their self-reported identity. Subjects report beliefs about other identity group members’ and own approval for norm-inconsistent behaviour.	Subjects choose their expected payoff by deciding whether to send norm-consistent (\$2 or \$6 lottery) or norm-inconsistent letters (\$6). They must sign the letters, and address and stamp the envelopes.	Subjects learn the payoff of their decision (which is uncertain only if they chose norm-consistent letters). Then we ask them their beliefs about other identity group members’ and own approval of voting for a candidate of the opposite identity group.	Subjects receive an add’l \$6. Using the strategy method, subjects indicate their willingness to punish/reward norm-consistent and norm-inconsistent letter writers from both their own and the other group (up to \$1.5, each \$1 translates to reward/punishment of \$3). They are then matched with one other subject in the experiment.	Subjects report how likely others of the same group were to write norm-consistent and norm-inconsistent letters. Outcomes are revealed. Subjects are paid and dismissed.

Task 2 provides subjects with an incentivized choice between a norm-inconsistent and a norm-consistent action. Specifically, subjects are told that they will have to sign, address, stamp and fill ten envelopes with advocacy letters, which will be mailed to ten different members of the US Congress after the experiment. These letters will either advocate for or against a policy (the Affordable Care Act or restrictions on immigration). Subjects are offered \$6 for sure if they choose to send letters that are norm-inconsistent. Subjects are told they will receive a lottery payment that yields \$2 or \$6 with equal probability if they choose to send letters that are norm-consistent. Subjects do not learn the outcome of the lottery until they have made their decision and completed the task. Keeping with the example above, this means that a self-identified Democrat in the Immigration-Partisanship treatment is offered the choice between

sending letters advocating for increasing restrictions on immigration and receiving \$6 for sure or else sending letters advocating for reducing restrictions on immigration and receiving the lottery payment. After making their choices, subjects have 15 minutes to complete the task. Once the monitor has determined that the task is complete and the letters have been correctly addressed and stamped, the subjects are given a password that allows them to go on to Task 3.¹

At the outset of Task 3, subjects are told their payoff based on their choice (and when applicable the outcome of the lottery) in Task 2. Task 3 then asks subjects another question intended to measure the strength of identity-driven norms. Specifically, subjects are asked how much they believe other members of their identity group would approve or disapprove if they voted for a candidate from the other party (or ideology) in the next federal election. We also ask subjects how much they would approve or disapprove if they learned that another member of their identity group voted for the opposite group. Again, following the example, this means that a Democrat would be asked how much they believe other Democrats would approve or disapprove if they voted for a Republican in the next federal election. Then they would be asked how much they would approve if they learned that another Democrat voted for a Republican in the next federal election. These questions measure an identity related norm – specifically, the norm against voting for the other side (a vote norm).

Task 4 provides an incentivized measure of norm-strength. This is the norm regarding the policy they were asked to support or oppose in their letters. Specifically, we once again remind subjects of their decision and earnings from Task 2, and then we use the strategy method to elicit willingness to punish/reward others who chose to send norm-consistent or norm-inconsistent letters in Task 2. All subjects are told that they have been allocated an additional \$6 at the start of Task 4. They are then told that they can spend money to punish and reward others. Specifically, for each \$0.01 that they spend on punishment they can reduce the payoff of another subject by \$0.03, or for each \$0.01 that they spend on reward, they can increase the

¹ All but one participant completed the task. One subject asked to have their data withdrawn after making their choice in Task 2 because, to paraphrase, they didn't realize that we would actually have them send letters to Congress.

payoff of another subject by \$0.03. Subjects are told that they will be matched with one other person in the room at the end of the experiment at random. This means that their punishment/reward decision will impact that person's payoff and that person's punishment/reward decision will impact their own payoff. They are asked how much they would like to punish or reward that individual depending on that individual's choice to send norm-consistent or -inconsistent letters.

In order to avoid deceiving subjects while also collecting data on our primary quantities of interest (punishment/reward of norm-inconsistent members of their own group), we employ the strategy method to get punishment/reward decisions for all possible subject types with whom they might be matched. That is, we ask subjects to make punish/reward decisions for each of the four possible cases:

1. a Democrat (or liberal) who sent norm-consistent letters (i.e. pro-ACA or pro-immigration);
2. a Democrat (or liberal) who sent norm-inconsistent letters (i.e. anti-ACA or anti-immigration);
3. a Republican (or conservative) who sent norm-consistent letters (i.e. anti-ACA or anti-immigration); and
4. a Republican (or conservative) who sent norm-inconsistent letters (i.e. pro-ACA or pro-immigration).

Participants can spend a maximum of \$1.50 since this ensures that their worst-case earnings from this Task are \$0 (i.e. if they spend \$1.50 punishing or rewarding others and are punished maximally for \$4.50). With this task we seek to measure whether subjects who have incurred a cost by following the norm, i.e. have sent norm-consistent letters and received the lower lottery payoff of \$2, are more likely to punish members of their group who were norm-inconsistent and reward members of their group who were norm-consistent. The comparison group is those that also selected the norm-consistent letters but did not experience a cost.

Task 5 asks subjects how likely it is that a member of their own group chose to send each kind of letter. This allows us to address the possible concern that the relevant punishment/reward

decisions were made with the expectation that they would not actually have consequences. In other words, if a subject believes that others in their group are extremely unlikely to send norm-inconsistent letters, then their punishment/reward decision might not be informative.

After Task 5, subjects are matched at random with another subject in the room, their final payoffs are calculated and displayed on their screen, and then they complete a short demographic questionnaire and are called over one-by-one for payment.

In total 206 subjects participated in 10 total experimental sessions, containing between 10 and 30 subjects each, depending on sign-up and show-up rates. Overall, we found it easier to recruit Democrats and liberals than to recruit Republicans and conservatives, and as a consequence less than 40% of the sample consists of members of the latter two identity groups. Of the 206 subjects, 136 were liberals or Democrats and 70 were conservatives or Republicans (see Table 2). During the experimental sessions, 87 of the liberals/Democrats had their ideological identity primed and 49 had their partisan identity primed. Meanwhile, 31 of the conservative/Republicans had their ideological identity primed and 39 had their partisan identity primed. Sessions lasted on average 45 minutes, and subjects were paid an average of 17.90 dollars, including a \$7 payment for arriving on time. Instructions were delivered on-screen via zTree and were self-paced, since the content was personalized by the subject’s self-reported partisan or ideological identity. A monitor answered any questions that arose privately. Due to a software error, we were unable to collect demographic questionnaire data on the 23 subjects in our first session. We conducted no additional unreported data and no pilot sessions.

Table 2: Identity Distribution of Participants

Treatment	Participant Identity	
	liberal/Democrat	conservative/Republican
Ideology identity	87	31
Partisan identity	49	39
Total	136	70

Results

Our theory applies to individuals that choose to experience a cost in order to comply with the norms of their identity. This requires individuals to perceive such norms. *Do individuals perceive group norms?* The first thing we explore is whether individuals do in fact perceive a group norm for the issue on which they will be asked to experience a cost. This norm is measured as: 1) the (dis)approval that individuals expect others with the same identity to express towards them if they chose to violate the norm; and 2) the (dis)approval that individuals would express to others with the same identity that chose to violate the norm.

Figure 1 gives the distribution of expected approval (from 0 to 10) by others for violating the norm. We see that for liberals/Democrats that the vast majority (88.2%) would expect disapproval. For conservatives/Republicans, again a majority would expect disapproval but there is a significant minority (22.9%) that would not. Figure 2 gives the distribution of approval of others for violating the norm. Again, the vast majority of liberals/Democrats (77.21) would disapprove. Among conservatives/Republicans those that would approve are roughly equal with those that would disapprove, although the magnitude of disapproval is stronger.

Figure 1: (Dis)approval by others for violating the norm

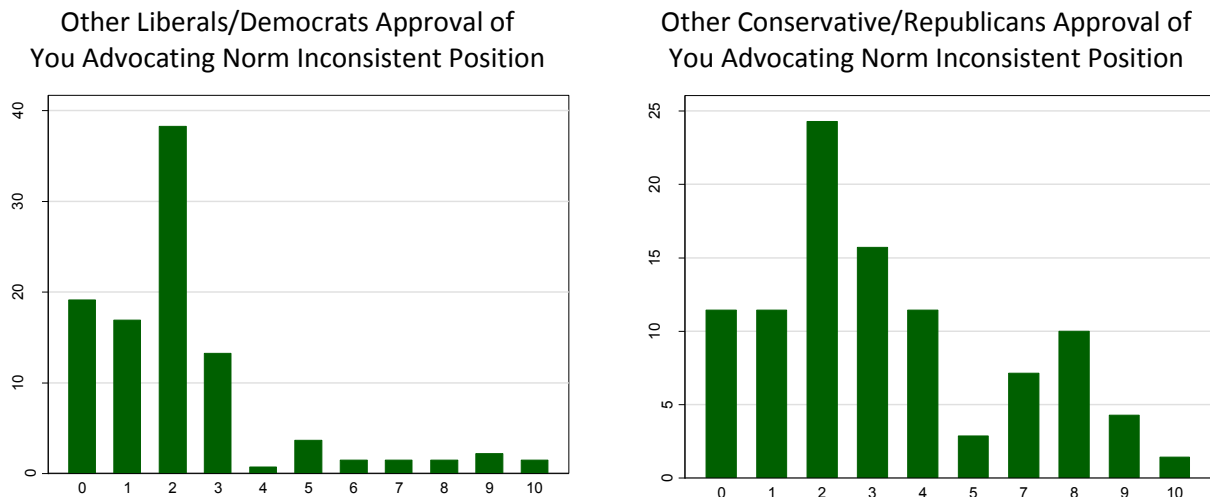
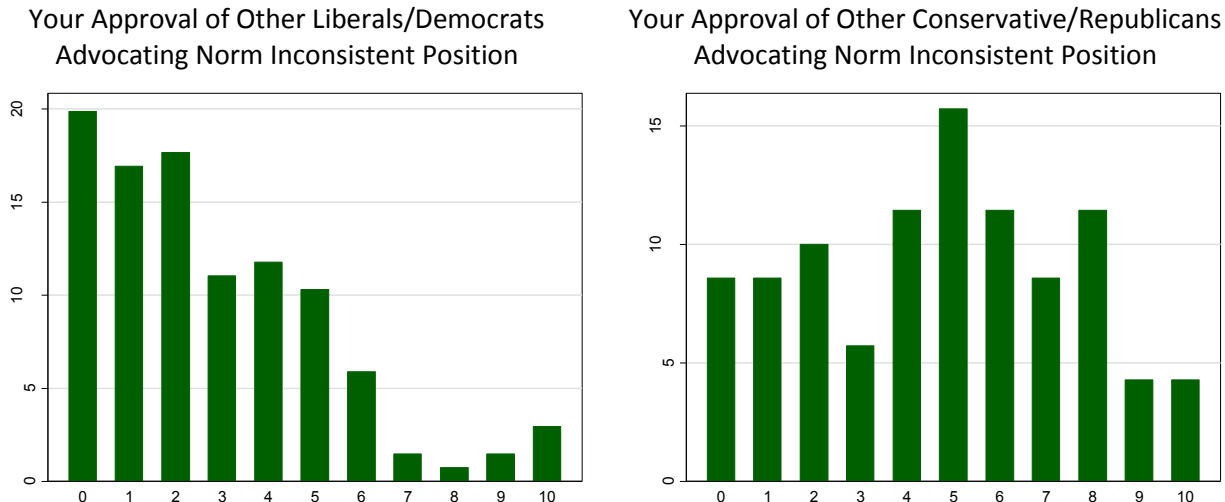


Figure 2: (Dis)approval of others for violating the norm



It is clear that liberals and Democrats perceive a norm against supporting the issues for which they are asked to experience a cost (ACA and immigration). There is some but weak evidence that conservatives and Republicans also perceive a norm.

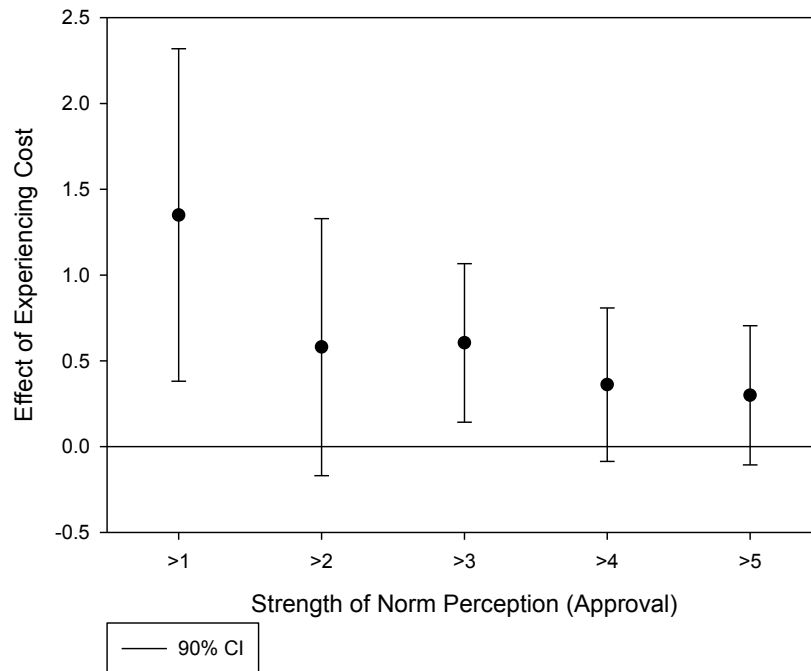
Again, our theory applies to individuals that choose to experience a cost in order to comply with the norms of their identity. *How many individuals followed the norm despite the potential cost of doing so?* Overall, 76.5 percent of liberals/Democrats (74.7/79.6) chose the norm consistent task, while only 37.14 percent of conservatives/Republicans (32.3/41.0) did the same. And, of those that perceived a norm (gave a score less than five on both of the two norm questions), 87.21 percent of liberals/Democrats chose the norm consistent task, while 64.71 percent of conservatives/Republicans did the same. This means that of the original 136 liberals/Democrats, 85 (63%) perceived a norm and followed it at a cost. Meanwhile, of the original 70 conservative/Republicans, 14 (20%) perceived a norm and followed it at a cost.

It is not clear if we have just chosen the wrong issues for conservatives/Republicans or conservatives/Republicans are less likely to perceive and follow group norms (at a cost) or if the individuals that identified as conservative/Republican in our sample are not typical of the group with which they identify. Given that our sample is one of students, we tend towards the latter explanation. Whatever the explanation, we decided we do not have enough conservatives and Republicans perceiving and choosing the norm consistent task to test our theory. We do,

however have plenty of liberals/Democrats that both perceive the norm and choose to experience a cost in order to comply with the norm (63%).

We are now prepared to ask: *What are the effects of experiencing a cost due to choosing the norm consistent option?* We are interested in the effect of experiencing a cost due to choosing a norm and so we compare those that chose the norm-consistent task and experienced a cost to those that chose the norm-consistent task and did not experience a cost. We would also like to restrict our sample to those that perceived a norm and we would like to see how the effect varies by the strength of this norm. We begin by looking at the effect on how much individuals are willing (at a cost to themselves) to reward others with the same identity for complying with group norms (i.e., choose the norm-consistent task). Figure 3 plots the effect at varying strengths of the norm. The norm strengths are based on those that gave a score <5, <4, <3 <2 and <1 on both the expected approval by others and the approval of others for violating the policy norm from Task 1.

Figure 3. Rewarding of a Norm Consistent Democrat/Liberal

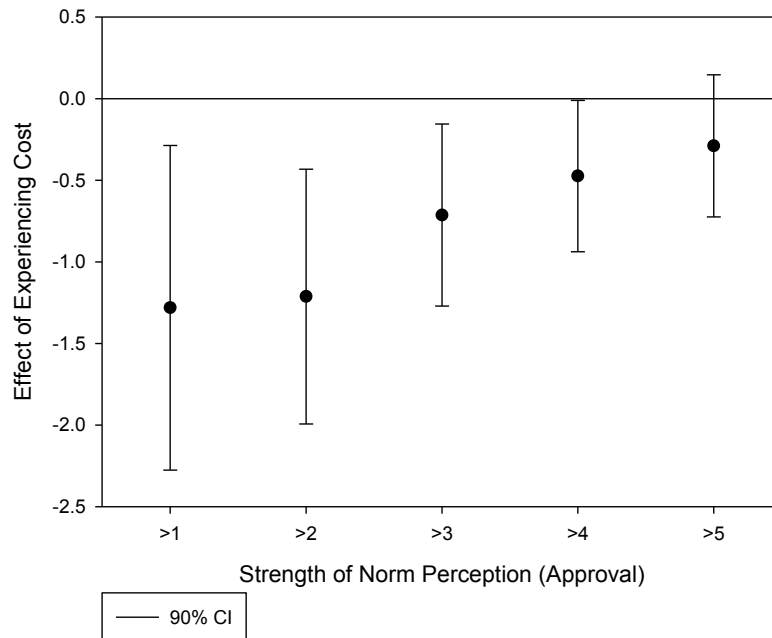


We see that those that experienced the cost are more likely to reward liberals/Democrats like themselves for complying with the norm. The effect magnitude increases with the strength of

the perceived norm. Using a 0.05 one-tailed test, these effects are significant in two of the five levels of norm strength. (This is also true using a 0.05 two-tailed test.) When the strength of the norm is an approval of less than three, the magnitude of the effect is \$0.60 and when the strength of the norm is an approval less than one, the magnitude of the effect is \$1.25.

Figure 4 plots how much individuals are willing (at a cost to themselves) to punish others with the same identity for violating group norms (i.e., choose the norm-inconsistent task) at varying strengths of the norm. We see that those that experienced the cost are more likely to punish Liberals/Democrats like themselves for violating the norm. Again, the magnitude of the effect increases with the strength of the perceived norm. The effect is significant at four of the five norm strengths. The magnitude of the effects ranges from \$0.29 to \$1.28.

Figure 4. Punishment of a Norm Inconsistent Democrat/Liberal

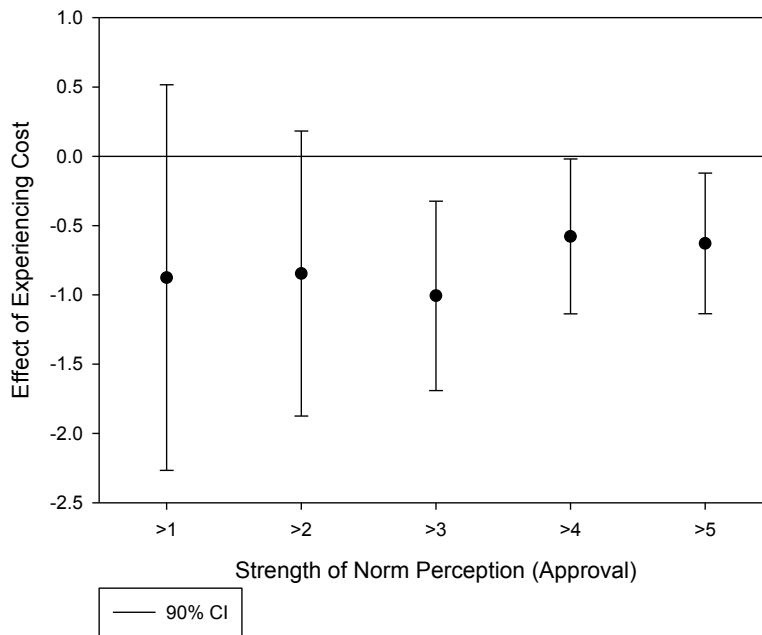


Based on these results, it does appear to be some evidence that *complying with a group norm at a cost reinforces that group norm.*

Next, we look at the effect of expressing a cost due to complying with a norm on the perceived strength of a different norm. This is the norm: do not vote for the other side. It is measured as

the expected approval of others (on a 0 to 10 scale) for voting for a candidate of the opposite identity (a conservative candidate if the individual identifies as liberal and a Republican candidate if the individual identified as Democrat). Figure 5 plots the effect of experiencing a cost on the perception of this vote norm (measured in Task 3) at varying levels of strength of the original policy norm regarding the ACA/immigration (Task 1). The magnitude of the effect does not vary by the strength the policy norm and is statistically significant at three of the five levels. Experiencing a cost decreases the expected approval of others for voting for a candidate of the opposite identity by between 0.58 and 1.01 dollars.

Figure 5. Others' Expected Approval of Voting for a Norm Inconsistent Candidate



Overall, there is moderate evidence that *individuals that experience a cost because they chose to comply with a norm of their political identity are more likely to perceive that and other group norms more strongly*. In fact, they are more willing to experience an additional cost in order to punish and reward others in their group for violating and complying with the norm.

As a robustness check, we asked respondents how likely it was that someone with the same identity would choose the norm consistent and inconsistent options. This is done to check that

individuals saw the choices regarding punishing and rewarding to be meaningful. For example, if the individual indicated they would pay \$0.50 to punish a norm-inconsistent liberal/Democrat, they did believe there was a possibility they would have to pay this amount. On choosing the norm consistent option, liberals and Democrats gave a score of 7.9 on a 1 to 10 scale. On choosing the norm inconsistent option, liberals and Democrats gave a score of 3.3. The norm-consistent option was seen as more likely than the norm-inconsistent option. However, only 2.9 percent (3) individuals felt that there was no chance of another liberal/Democrat choosing the norm-inconsistent option.

As a second robustness check, we checked if experiencing a cost due to choosing the norm-consistent option had an effect on liberals/Democrats punishing or rewarding conservatives/Republicans. While we expect liberals/Democrats to punish or reward conservative/Republicans for their choice, our theory does not predict any effects from experiencing a cost on these choices. We found no evidence of such effects.

As a sanity check, we looked at how perceptions of the policy norm predicted whether an individual would choose the norm-consistent or inconsistent letter option. Among liberals/Democrats, those that would expect disapproval by others (score <5) for violating the norm were 23 percent more likely to choose the norm-consistent option. Those liberals/Democrats that indicated they would disapprove of others for violating the norm were 36 percent more likely to choose the norm-consistent option. In other words, perceiving the norm increases the probability of selecting the norm consistent option. Interestingly among conservatives/Republicans the corresponding numbers are 2.4 percent less likely (not statistically significant) and 32 percent more likely. It would appear that amongst this group, expected (dis)approval by others has little effect on choice. This underlines the problem we have with our conservative/ Republican sample.

Proposed Follow-up Online Experiment

Our laboratory experiment provides evidence that compared to those for whom norm-adherence is not costly, those who incur a cost to follow their group's norms are more willing to

incur future costs to support group norms. That is, costly norm compliance seems to have a reinforcing effect on the group's norms. However, due to relatively small sample size for people who identify as conservative (or Republicans) and complied with the norm, we are able to identify these effects only for those who identify as liberal (or Democrats). Moreover, it is important to know to what extent the patterns identified in the lab also appear in more naturalistic settings. Thus, we propose an online experiment to be conducted with workers via Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform. Given the lower per-participant payments with MTurk, we will be able to collect a larger sample, and we believe the more naturalistic setting provides a nice test of the generalizability of our previous findings.

Two weeks prior to our study, we will invite a large sample of workers to complete a survey that measures their partisan (or ideological) identity as well as their sensitivity to social norms. We will re-contact a subset of the respondents in a manner that prevents individuals from connecting the recontact with the initial survey and offer them an opportunity to work for a lobbying campaign on one of two issues. Their task will be to code open-ended responses to an issue question from one of two partisan surveys, which will also be conducted prior to the experiment on separate samples. The participants in the experiment will know that their efforts will be used to help craft persuasive arguments for proponents of the issue.

One of the issues will be norm-consistent and one norm-inconsistent (we know this from their previous survey responses), and workers will be told that their payment depends on which issue they choose to work on. If they work on the norm-inconsistent issue, they will receive a fixed payment ($\$X$). If they work on the norm-consistent issue, they will receive a lower fixed payment ($\$0.5X$) *plus* an additional bonus ($\$0.5X$) that is paid with probability 0.5. This induces an (expected) cost of choosing the norm-consistent task *ex ante* and a realized cost of doing so for half of the participants who choose that task, similar to our laboratory design.

Participants then complete their chosen task and after doing so, they learn whether they received the bonus (if applicable). They then complete a survey, including self-reported ideological identity and a battery of questions to elicit perceptions of their group's normative attitudes towards the issues in the lobbying campaign. If the same pattern holds in this setting

as in the lab, we expect to see that *conditional on choosing the norm-consistent task*, those who incur the cost will report stronger normative attitudes toward the issues.

Finally, for those that completed the norm-consistent task, we will elicit the price $\$P$ at which the subject would be willing to work on behalf of the norm-*inconsistent* issue. Specifically, those subjects who chose the norm-consistent issue will be informed that we plan to hire more people in the future to work on the norm-inconsistent issue, but that we do not yet know the price at which we will offer the opportunity to do so. They will tell us their price, and then, a few weeks later, we will draw a random price $\$Q$ between $\$0$ and $\$2X$. All subjects for whom $Q \geq P$ will then be re-contacted and offered another chance to work for $\$Q$ on the norm-inconsistent issue. If the distribution of P for subjects who actually incurred the cost of norm-consistency lies above the distribution of P for subjects who did not incur the cost, this provides additional evidence of the self-reinforcing effects of costly norm compliance.

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