

## **Counter-polarizing political appeals and polarized public opinion**

By

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Polarized political conflict can hamper intelligent policy discourse and militate against rational and responsible decisions by citizens. In the case of opinion in the US about policies to mitigate climate change, for example, citizens not only take opposing sides on the issue according to their Democratic or Republican partisan leanings—an appropriate response on many issues—but one side in the debate (Republicans and conservatives in this case), they largely ignore the conclusions of an overwhelming scientific consensus. A partisan division that could reflect informed, competent judgment on many issues is perverse and destructive when one side of the debate, on any conventional assessment of the evidence, is simply incorrect in potentially calamitous judgments.

Political scientists have devoted a great deal of attention to the broad forces that have shaped partisan polarization—from party realignment to elite behavior to media fragmentation, among others. An important additional question, however, is whether policy advocates can do anything about the character of discourse and citizen responses? Are there strategies for policy advocacy that might moderate polarized responses by citizens and enable more information to get through and shape judgment? Or are advocates sharply constrained by the conditions of political competition—bound to play their part in reinforcing the polarized discourse?

Some scholars of climate-change communications and opinion have suggested that policy advocates do have some options, and may be able to break through the pattern of polarized rhetoric, partisan responses, and uninformed opinion. Kahan et al. (2011) find that merely providing citizens with pertinent, valid information about climate change has no constructive overall effect. It moves citizens who are predisposed to support mitigation policies—those who lean to the left or identify with the Democratic Party—in the expected direction, toward stronger support for mitigation policies. Unfortunately, however, it also moves citizens who are predisposed to oppose such policies—those who lean to the right or identify with the Republican Party—in the opposite direction, toward stronger opposition to such policies. In a direct violation of any straightforward notion of rationality, right-leaning citizens respond to reliable new information in a manner directly contrary to its manifest significance. In short, providing objective, non-partisan information merely increases polarization. However, Kahan et al. propose a strategy for overcoming this perversity. Advocates of policy interventions to deal with climate change can frame their appeals on the basis of the values that are most important to the kinds of citizens predisposed to resist such action. For example, they can appeal to conservatives' values of purity and stewardship of nature or show deference to conservatives' concerns about excessive government regulation. Kahan et al. find that this strategy results in more substantial—positive rather than negative—response to scientific information among these citizens.

In a similar vein, Lupia (2013) suggests that advocates can enhance support for climate-change mitigation among skeptical, conservative citizens by using spokespersons who reflect the general values and identifications of conservative citizens. He points to an environmental-advocacy documentary film whose spokesperson identifies himself as an oil-industry engineer, a married suburbanite, and a Republican and professes to having been initially skeptical about climate change. Having established his credibility with the audience, the spokesperson proceeds to explain how his careful consideration of the evidence had persuaded him of the reality of climate change and the urgency of taking action. Although Lupia does not have data on the impact of the film, he suggests that it reflects a sophisticated understanding of how people allocate their attention and trust to sources of information.

In short, these scholars suggest that these more accommodating, deferential rhetorical strategies will attract conservative- and Republican-leaning citizens to support for climate-change mitigation, in ways that mere scientific findings cannot match. We do not know how common such extreme reactions to neutral or objective information responses are on other policy issues or in other kinds of judgment. It is likely that left-leaning citizens exhibit comparable reactions on certain issues, where their favored policies conflict with the most authoritative reasoning and evidence. Stated generally, then, these scholars propose that policy advocates can significantly subdue the effects of partisan polarization on political discourse and citizens' responses by employing certain depolarizing kinds of appeals.

This paper explores the possibilities and limitations of depolarizing advocacy strategies. We take into account that there are alternative versions of the strategy, with different notions about how best to break through the partisan barriers to new information. Moreover, we go beyond Kahan et al. and Lupia in considering the constraints on such strategies in a competitive political environment—one where opponents will have counter-strategies, and where the effort and enthusiasm of supporters varies.

This study also contributes to the literature on motivated reasoning and political framing. Existing research has explored the extent to which individual characteristics, such as sophistication and opinion strength, or contextual variables, such as the extent of elite polarization or individuals' motivations while forming opinions, moderate motivated reasoning. Our study considers the role that the content of political appeals can play in exacerbating or mitigating motivated reasoning.

In our larger project, we plan to address a number of questions, motivated by the question of counter-polarizing rhetoric: 1) Can policy advocates use rhetorical strategies to reduce partisan polarization of responses and resulting opinions? Put differently, do some kinds

of persuasive appeals have such a depolarizing effect? If so, what kinds? 2) Do depolarizing rhetorical strategies facilitate the reception and processing of information, such as scientific findings about climate change, on the part of citizens whose predispositions would otherwise lead them to reject it? Can these strategies thus overcome the perverse phenomenon of people receiving information and modifying their opinion in the wrong direction? 3) If such depolarizing effects occur, do they stand up in the face of counter-appeals from opposition advocates in the competitive environment of political debate? Or on the other hand, do opponents polarizing or re-polarizing rhetoric trump an advocate's efforts to reduce polarization? 4) If depolarizing rhetorical strategies are effective in overcoming resistance from potential opponents, do they have a political cost of deflating the enthusiasm of potential supporters? Is polarizing rhetoric essential for mobilizing the advocate's natural supporters?

Finally, 5) are the depolarizing appeals more effective than putting comparable effort into clarifying or reinforcing the authoritative character of the information (if it has authoritative support)? To the extent that depolarizing rhetoric represents an investment of time, audience attention, or other resources, it should be compared with further investment in conveying the relevant information. These issues are obviously matters of direct practical concern for policy advocates—especially those whose causes would benefit from enhanced citizen openness to relevant information about policy decisions. At the same time, they are important for understanding the broader conditions of polarized politics, its constraints, and the possibilities for constructive political discourse that it may permit.

We have identified a large, and quite complex set of issues. In our initial survey, we have set out to explore this entire set of issues using two policy areas—climate change and entitlement reform—both of them areas where strong partisan and ideological predispositions cause resistance to expert information and the policies it supports. In doing so, we have divided our relatively large sample—3000 citizens—into a large enough number of treatment groups, with relatively modest numbers in each group, that we anticipate difficulty finding statistically significant effects, even for effects that are substantively significant. Although we may publish from the current data, we intend mainly to use the results to guide the design of surveys that will provide the basis for publication.

In this current paper—based on our first encounter with the data from this exploratory survey, we focus on the first four of questions listed above.

## **The Logic And Limits Of Counter-Polarizing Policy Advocacy**

Our central objective is to evaluate the claims of scholars who propose what we call the strategy of counter-polarizing policy advocacy and argue that certain sorts of appeals for policies can subdue the tendency toward polarized partisan responses and make possible more reception of pertinent reliable information. The claim is potentially important in certain policy areas, e.g. climate change, where advocates and observers have been frustrated by widespread refusal of both elites and citizens to take critical information seriously—especially, scientific findings about climate change. For example, one prominent research group claims empirical support for the effectiveness of such depolarizing advocacy.

Although we think the possibilities for depolarizing policy advocacy are important to investigate, we approach them with caution, on several grounds. In this section we provide a theoretical rationale for counter-polarization strategy, based on or consistent with the existing work. However, we also suggest grounds for skepticism about the effectiveness of such strategies. We suggest three main obstacles for counter-polarizing strategies. First, the expected advantages in the direct effectiveness of counter-polarizing policy appeals to citizens predisposed to resist the policy may be small, even in the favorable circumstance of one-sided messages. We find theoretical grounds to suspect such a result. Second, even if substantial gains do occur in the one-sided circumstance, they may not be robust in a competitive environment, where advocates on the other side (for example, opponents of climate-change mitigation policies) can seek to undermine counter-polarizing efforts by stressing appeals that magnify differences and highlight partisan identities and concerns. In a contest where one side seeks to soothe partisan feelings and the other side seeks to inflame them, the inflammatory approach may have the upper hand. Third, if counter-polarizing strategies produce gains with resistance-prone citizens, they may also reduce enthusiasm and mobilization on the advocate's side. The same features of appeals that subdue partisan identity-based opposition, by predisposed opponents, will likely deflate identity-based enthusiasm and mobilization by predisposed supporters.

### **Framing, Motivated Reasoning, and Strategies of Advocacy**

The analyses suggesting the strategy of counter-polarizing advocacy represent extensions of two influential streams of research—one on framing and persuasion, and one on partisan motivated reasoning. Stated simply, the framing literature suggests that presenting appeals that highlight different values or considerations can often produce different opinions on a given policy question. Somewhat in contrast, research on partisan motivated reasoning suggests that people with a strong partisan identification attend to and process information—including policy appeals—in selective and biased fashion, and

will overlook information in conflict with partisan predispositions. Not surprising, findings on two-sided framing suggests that people filter out the appeals that oppose their dispositions. Instead of opposing frames making people more moderate, they become more sharply polarized according to general predispositions. Implications for competence have been in eyes of the beholder: On one hand, no information gets through. On other hand, settled values and ideological tendencies determine opinion.

The counter-polarization strategy goes beyond these findings in two ways: It suggests important differences in the effects of different frames, even when they are designed to move policy the same direction. And it suggests differences in the patterns of effects for different groups of people, according to their partisan and ideological predispositions. The appeals that will move left-leaning citizens to support a policy will not move right-leaning citizens or will move them to oppose it. But other appeals may move the right-leaning citizens to support it. Importantly, these expectations are not as straightforward or intuitively compelling as standard framing effects. Such effects may be subtle, if they occur at all. What makes them potentially important is the possibility that they can help overcome stalemate on a long-established conflict where the opposing sides, responding to conventional polarized rhetoric, have been locked in place.

### **Varieties of Appeals**

We want to explore the possibilities for counter-polarizing advocacy, and the constraints and limitations on such strategies rather broadly, taking into account multiple variations of the approach. To do so, we distinguish several types of advocacy appeal. Some are relevant for identifying the counter-polarizing strategy, in several varieties. Some are relevant for comparisons with more conventional appeals. And still others represent alternative strategies that may have advantages in some of the same circumstances—when a major objective is to induce a group of resistant citizens to attend more effectively to credible information.

We consider three kinds of variation in appeals.

1) For appeals that frame choices in terms of some value or goal, we note that an appeal may have two types of *predisposition targeting*. It can target core values for the advocates' own partisan group—a core-value or *bolstering-value* appeal—or it may target values more characteristic of opposition partisans—an opposition-value or *bridging-value* appeal.

2) An appeal on a policy issue may or may not express an attitude or judgment about the opposition advocates. In most cases, this attitude will be either neutral (or not expressed) or else will be aggressive or hostile, as occurs in a negative campaign attack.

Issues on which policy advocates have strong support on the basis of authoritative information—as in the scientific support for climate-change mitigation—may lend themselves to particularly strong negative attacks on the opponents. Although advocates will sometimes express positive judgments about opposing advocates, this approach seems to be rare—associated with an exceptionally ambitious counter-polarization strategy—and we do not deal with it in this paper.

3) Policy appeals may focus on various types of considerations, apart from values or goals. One alternative is to focus on cues about the policy – that is, drawing attention to significant supporters of the advocates’ position. Cue-based appeals, like value appeals, can have two types of predisposition targeting. They can offer cue sources that engage either core supporters’ or potential opponents’ predispositions—respectively, in our terms, *bolstering-cue appeals* versus *bridging-cue appeals*. We examine bridging-cue appeals as one of the significant types of counter-polarizing appeal.

Another alternative type of consideration focuses on policy information—budget data, scientific findings, specifics of policy design, explanations of policy mechanisms, and the like. And another, closely related type focuses on cues or authority-certification for such policy information—for example, by describing the breadth of the scientific consensus on climate change, or explaining the authority of a scientific organization. These two types of considerations—policy information and authority-certification are arguably the leading alternative to bridging-value appeals for broadening support beyond the favorably predisposed.

Speaking broadly, these distinctions point to a strategic alternative for policy advocates. If a policy conflict has become entrenched, and opponents of a policy persistently ignore or discount highly authoritative policy information, advocates of the policy can put their advocacy eggs in either of two baskets: They can defer to the opponents’ values and identifications—our bridging approaches--or they can seek to enhance the credibility and persuasiveness of the information. Of course they can pursue both approaches, but with limited resources and audience attention, they will need to choose priorities.

In some of our analyses, we explore the effects of two-sided debate--so, for example, opponents of climate change mitigation or opponents of entitlement reform respond to the advocates’ arguments. For these opponent appeals, we use similar styles of rhetoric, although we do not distinguish and test so many varieties.

## Relevant Outcomes

Given our central concerns with polarized conflicts, motivated reasoning, and strategies for overcoming them, we look at three distinct approaches to measuring effects. On some of them, the rationale for the measure presumes an asymmetry in the strength or quality of supporting policy information. Although the issue of climate change is certainly the outstanding example of such an issue, less pronounced asymmetries—with one side apparently overlooking the more important information—occur with some regularity in policy debate. Our second case of entitlement reform is in our view such a case. These are the kind of issues on which the phenomenon of partisan motivated reasoning can most distort policy outcomes, by comparison with full-information judgments.

First, we consider an appeal's net effects on support for the focal policy, summing over all partisan groups. We ask which sorts of appeal maximize overall support for an advocate's position.

Second, we consider an appeal's persuasive effect separately for the two distinct partisan predisposition groups—the policy advocates' in-group party (for example, Democrats on climate change mitigation; and Republicans on entitlement reforms) and the out-group party. These separate effects have direct bearing on two further questions. One is how an appeal affects the degree of partisan polarization in policy opinion: If advocates for climate change mitigation or for entitlement reform use certain kinds of appeals, do they bring Democratic- and Republican-identifying citizens closer together on the policy preference?

The other further question addressed by these separate effects—pertinent for issues with an important information-quality advantage on the advocates' side—is how an appeal affects potential (i.e. partisan predisposition-inclined) opponents' reception and acceptance of the information. If the same advocates use certain kinds of appeals, do they have more success in inducing potential opponents to attend to an immediately following presentation of information, and to incorporate it in their policy responses? Concretely, for example, can certain appeals for policies (perhaps counter-polarizing) induce Republican-identifying citizens to recognize the overwhelming scientific consensus on the need for action on climate change?

Third, we take into account that in real-world political debate, policy appeals encounter replies. The effect of exposure to such an exchange is not necessarily a simple sum of the separate effects of each appeal. In principle, therefore, we are interested in all of the

above approaches to measuring effects under conditions of two-sided debate. We do not go through all the possible combinations of appeals, or look at all of the relevant outcomes for two-sided debate, in this paper. Given the likelihood that opposing appeals will, in large part, wash out—leaving relatively subtle net effects—we will put off most of the analysis of effects of two-sided debates for subsequent studies with larger cell sizes for the relevant groups.

## **Expectations**

Our motivation in this paper is not primarily to test particular psychological mechanisms, but rather to explore the potential effectiveness of counter-polarizing advocacy strategies. Thus we test hypotheses that we derive, directly or by extension, from the literature that makes the case for counter-polarizing advocacy. Stated simply, they propose that appeals that use bridging values or source cues, as opposed to bolstering ones, will moderate dispositional opponents' partisan responses. Such appeals will therefore promote more thoughtful response to advocates' arguments and, in particular, will permit more attentive and accuracy-seeking processing of the advocates' authoritative policy information. This argument predicts primarily that opposition-predisposed subjects who receive counter-polarizing, bridging value appeals or bridging cues will respond more favourably—with more support for focal policies—than those receiving more standard bolstering value appeals or cues. It also predicts that such subjects will respond more strongly, and in the intended direction, to immediately following presentation of authoritative policy information that supports those policies.

We regard these expectations of the counter-polarization strategy as plausible. But we do have theoretical reservations. In general, the links between policies and proposed effects or values should be stronger for bolstering appeals than for bridging appeals. It is, after all, the relative strength of the various links that sorted out the supporters and opponents of the focal policies in the first place. If climate change mitigation policies effectively served conservative interests, rather than liberal and environmentalist interests, we would expect conservative groups to have been the main supporters of such policies all along. For the most part, bridging appeals have the handicap of substantively weaker, less credible arguments. For these reasons, we have no strong expectations of our own about the effects of counter-polarizing appeals.

At the same time, we see straightforward considerations for thinking that counter-polarizing appeals may be largely defeated in two-sided political debate, as the opposition party can simply re-emphasize partisan concerns. We also see grounds for thinking that counter-polarizing appeals may also sacrifice active, intense support on the part of predisposed core supporters.

## Experiment

We test these hypotheses with an online survey experiment conducted in October 2014. Respondents were drawn from an internet panel and are representative of the U.S. population on major demographic categories.<sup>1</sup> We have completed surveys from 3,096 respondents.<sup>2</sup> Our experimental design includes partisan messages concerning two issues: global warming and entitlement reform. We selected these issues as they are major and politically salient policy questions facing the country and the weight of factual information tends to favor one side. For global warming, the scientific evidence and the extent of consensus among scientists is clear and compelling: global reductions in GHG emissions must occur quickly in order to avoid drastic climate changes. On entitlement reform, liberal and conservative budget experts generally agree that the long-term growth of Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and other entitlement programs, under current policies, will impose unsustainable fiscal burdens—the result of currently mandated benefit increases and a rapidly aging population. Independent analysts argue that a balanced and effective package of measures to avoid long-term fiscal calamity will require reforms to reduce the growth of entitlement benefits.

### *Treatments*

All respondents were randomly assigned to one of the two issues and were provided with very brief statements describing the issue and noting the positions of most Democrats and Republican. For instance, those in the global warming treatments read:

There has been a lot of discussion in Washington about global warming.

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<sup>1</sup> Respondents were provided by Survey Sampling International – a market research firm that maintains a  
<sup>2</sup> Since we are interested in the effect of political messages given exposure, ensuring respondent attention to the treatment materials is critical. We included a screening question at the start of the survey which checks whether or not potential respondents actually read information items similar in nature and length to our treatment materials. Specifically, respondents were instructed to read the three short paragraphs outlining arguments for and against expanding commuter rail systems across the U.S.. They were asked to identify one of the arguments that appeared in the information pages from a list of four items. In order to reach our target of 3100 respondents, a full 5,900 individuals completed this screening question with a pass rate of only 52%. In order to ensure that participants continued to pay attention to the survey, we also included three attention screener questions at different points in the survey. These questions included a fairly long introductory statement that explains to respondents that they should answer the question in a non-sensical way. For instance, respondents are instructed to pick all four options in what appears to be a basic question about interest in politics. In the analysis presented here, we exclude respondents who failed all three of the questions (16% of 3,096). We also exclude individuals who took less than five seconds to read the first information item included in the experiment and shown to all groups (8.5% of remaining 2598). The final sample is thus 2,378 with an average of 77 respondents in each treatment group. In revised versions of this paper we will note the impact of these screening and selection decisions on our results as recommended in Berinsky, Margolis, & Sances (2013).

Most Democrats call for strong government measures to cut emissions of greenhouse gases and help control global warming. Most Republicans say these measures are not needed and oppose them.

Thus we use issues on which the parties are in fact sharply divided, and we provide a baseline condition that reminds or informs respondents of the party differences—making party cues readily available. We establish the partisan context of the policy debate, much as people would encounter it in real-world political news on the kinds of issues on which partisan motivated reasoning is likely to play a major role, and for which the depolarizing strategy makes ambitious claims. In effect, we construct a correspondingly hard case to test those claims.

Individuals assigned to the control groups read only this information. All other subjects were randomly assigned to treatment groups receiving information that varied along three dimensions: 1) appeal type; 2) factual information statement; 3) one-sided vs competitive framing.

First, we present an appeal by the initiating, information-bearing party (Democrats on global warming, Republicans on entitlement reform). These appeals are one of three types: standard partisan (core-support *bolstering*); depolarizing (opposing predisposition *bridging*); and hostile partisan (core-support bolstering with additional hostile elements). The standard partisan appeal is a short statement (three sentences) intended to be representative of appeals actually found in political discourse. For the sake of realism, all of the appeals include a brief, strategically innocuous passage that we would expect to be included in any advocacy for the policy. After that, this appeal conveys values and considerations that are consistent with the predispositions of the initiating party's supporters.

Democrats say:

- Global warming is a serious problem and will affect everyone. It will have terrible effects on some of the world's most defenseless people, especially in Africa and Asia.
- It will destroy habitats for many plants and animals, and make many species go extinct.
- Global warming will cause more severe droughts and heat waves. These weather events will hurt farming and weaken the economy. More frequent violent storms, such as hurricanes and tornadoes, will destroy property and cause deaths.

By contrast, the depolarizing appeal’s distinctive items engage the predispositions of opposition-party supporters. One item notes that some leaders of that party have expressed support for the policy. (Bolsen et al. 2014 finds that pointing to cross-party support reduces partisan motivated reasoning). On the global warming issue, it reads

“Some Republicans agree that global warming is a real problem and that we need reasonable, responsible action.”

The second item in the depolarizing appeal presents an argument that engages certain values of the opposing party. In the case of global warming, it stresses that climate change policies must not create undue hardship for business or damage the economy—showing deference to some of the central Republican concerns about the issue.

The third, hostile-partisan appeal differs from the standard partisan appeal in the opposite direction. It presents the same arguments as the standard partisan, but also includes two additional items that serve as a partisan attack on the opposition party—disparaging their intelligence or good faith. On global warming, this appeal adds, “Republicans who oppose acting on global warming simply don’t understand reality, like people who believe the earth is flat.” And “Republicans don’t care about the harm they will do, as long as they can collect huge campaign contributions from special interests like big oil and gas companies. Instead of seeking to subdue partisan feelings, in other words, this treatment seeks to inflame them.

We are interested in the effects of the bolstering, bridging, and hostile-partisan appeals, in themselves. But a central issue is whether these strategies can affect the reception of pertinent, reliable policy information—in particular, whether the depolarizing strategy can encourage reception and processing of that information by the opposition-party identifiers. Thus each of the appeal-type treatments is matched by a corresponding treatment with an additional, very substantial presentation of such information. On global warming, these information-enriched treatments add:

Democrats point to findings in the latest report from the international scientific panel on climate change:

- Scientists are now even more confident about the causes of global warming. The report says it is just as certain that human activity causes global warming as it is that cigarettes cause cancer.
- Harmful effects of global warming -- like droughts, floods, heat waves, hurricanes and tornados, and losses of food production -- are happening sooner and are more severe than expected.

- We are already suffering serious consequences and they will continue to become more severe.
- The need to control greenhouse gases has become even more urgent.

Finally, our design takes into account that in real-world debate these appeals by the initiating, information-bearing party will encounter rebuttal, including efforts to re-establish partisan resistance, by the opposition party. Such rebuttals may immediately activate or reactivate partisan responses, essentially cancelling the effect of a depolarizing appeal. On global warming, the rebuttal reads:

Republicans say:

- Scientists don't all agree that the earth is getting warmer or that humans are causing it.
- The Democrats' global warming policies would mean a huge increase in government regulation and bureaucracy.
- These policies would raise costs for businesses and consumers and would hurt employment and economic growth.

### *Measures*

The dependent variable in the analysis presented below is a basic question that measures support or opposition toward significant government action intended to prevent coming policy consequences (i.e. climate change and massive government debt). Specifically, respondents in the global warming groups answered the following question:

“Some people believe the government should reduce spending on entitlement programs in the future. Other people believe the government should not reduce spending on these programs in the future. ... Which is closer to your view:

1. Government **should reduce** the costs of entitlement programs
2. Government **should not reduce** the costs of entitlement programs
3. Don't Know

After selecting a side on the issue, individuals indicated the strength of their position selecting from “very, somewhat, and not very strongly”. Individuals who initially answered “don't know” received a follow up question asking them to pick a side if they “had to choose”. Those who then selected “neither” are coded as having a neutral position on the issue while those that ultimately picked one side are coded the same as individuals who indicated their preference is not very strong. When combined, these questions yield a seven point scale which we rescaled to range between 0 and 1. Table 1 presents descriptive information about the distribution of the dependent variable across the treatment groups as well as the number of subjects in each group.

\*\*\*\* Table 1 \*\*\*\*

Our measure of partisanship employs the standard seven point scale. We used a series of branching questions starting with “Generally speaking do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, or an Independent”. Those who select on party are asked about the strength of their identification (Strong/Not very strong). Independents are asked if they lean towards a particular party. In keeping with related work on framing and motivated reasoning, we classify these ‘leaners’ as partisans since they tend to behave similarly (e.g. Bullock 2011; Bolsen et al 2014; Druckman et al 2012; Levendusky 2010;). We also exclude pure independents since our theoretical arguments do not directly apply to individuals without a partisan identification. After we remove these 381 independents, we are left with a sample of 1,969 comprised of 56% Democrats and 44% Republicans.

## Results

The first question we address is whether counter-polarizing appeals are effective in the aggregate. Effectiveness can be defined in two ways: an increase in overall support for a persuading party’s position on the issue, and, a decrease in the extent of partisan polarization on the issue. While the two potential effects are related, they do not necessarily work in tandem. Indeed it is possible that decreased polarization emerges despite decreased support for an advocate’s position. First we take up the question of aggregate support for the policy positions and turn to partisan polarization later in this section.

\*\*\*\* Table 2 \*\*\*\*

Table 2 presents estimates of the impact of different appeals for both partisan groups separately and combined. As is the case with a number of results from this study, there are differences in effects across the two issues. For entitlement reform, both the bolstering and bridging appeals are effective but the former shifts support by nearly twice as much. Among those in the control group, mean support for reform is only .29 and the mean is nearly 50% higher among those who received the bolstering message (.43). The effect of the counter-polarizing appeal is half as large at only .07.

Both the bolstering and bridging global warming appeals from the Democrats backfire in the aggregate. Mean support for action on climate change in the control group is .72. Support is slightly lower among those exposed to the bolstering message from the Democrats (-.04). The loss in support is even greater among those exposed to the bridging message at -.09. As with the entitlement reform results, the bolstering appeal is

relatively more effective than the bridging message although in the case of global warming ‘more effective’ is actually less ineffective, or, a weaker boomerang. Overall, there is no support for the claim that counter-polarizing messages are more effective in the aggregate. From the perspective of the persuading party, bolstering messages are superior to bridging messages for both issues.

A central claim supporting counter-polarizing messages is that they will be more effective, than bolstering appeals, at persuading those predisposed to reject messages from a particular source. Evidence presented in Table 2 provides mixed support for this hypothesis. Results from the entitlement reform experiment are clear – the two types of appeals have almost identical effects on out-party supporters (in this case the Democrats). Both messages increase support for the Republican position by about 0.1, or 10% of the one point scale. Despite explaining that some Democrats support reform and providing reassurance about the consequences for the most needy members of society, the bridging appeal is no more effective among Democrat identifiers. For global warming, we again see evidence that the appeals backfire. Support for action on climate change is lower among Republicans in both treatment groups compared to the control. It is the case, however, that the bridging appeal (-.07) causes less damage than the bolstering message (-.14). The fact that Republican identifiers become less likely to support action on climate change after exposure to these messages is consistent with motivated reasoning accounts of message effects. Even a message that includes references to cross party support, which has been shown to reduce motivated reasoning (Bolsen et al, 2014), yields effects opposite to the intended direction. This boomerang effect is, however, less severe than observed with the bolstering message.

Are bridging messages a lost opportunity to maximize support among co-partisans? If such appeals are designed to charm out-party supporters, they necessarily include arguments that are likely to be second best to those constructed with in-party supporters in mind. We find precisely this pattern of results for both issues. The bolstering message on entitlement reform is particularly effective among Republicans with an increase in support for reform of .20. The impact of the bridging appeal is considerably weaker at only .06. An advocate for reform who employs this bridging message thus fails to maximize potential support among those predisposed to support their side. These results also show us that the aggregate pattern, where the bolstering message was net more effective than the depolarizing appeal, is a product of the considerable impact of the bolstering message among Republicans.

The global warming experiment yields a similar pattern of results. Among Democrats, the in-party, the bolstering message has a weak positive effect of .05. The bridging appeal, however, surprisingly results in lower support for climate change action among

Democrats (-.10). The explanation for this effect is not clear. It could be that individuals with pre-treatment support for serious action are skeptical about the claim that emissions can be reduced without significant economic harm. It may also be the case that mentioning support among some Republicans prompts erroneous motivated reasoning whereby some Democrats reason that any Republican support for a position must be met with decreased support. Regardless, it is still the case that the bolstering appeal is considerably more effective among in-partisans. The difference between the effects of the two messages is large (.14) and distinguishable from zero ( $p=.02$ ).

Counter-polarizing theories further claim that bridging messages can help minimize the extent of partisan polarization at the mass level. We find some support for this claim. For both issues, the difference in mean support across partisan groups is essentially the same in the control and bridging groups. In contrast, bolstering messages result in greater partisan polarization. The difference in support for entitlement reform across parties is 0.29 in the control group, 0.27 in the bridging group, and 0.41 in the bolstering group. This increase is due in large part to the much greater impact of the bolstering message among in-partisans than among out-partisans. Recall that the bridging appeal has essentially the same impact on both Democrats and Republicans. Similarly, the partisan divide on global warming is 0.31 in the control group, 0.28 in the bridging group, and 0.48 in the bolstering group. In this case, the divide emerges due to the boomerang effect of the bolstering message among out-partisans. In both cases, we find that the bridging appeals yield less polarization than standard bolstering appeals. Results also show, however, that net support for each party's preferred position is higher when bolstering appeals are used instead of bridging appeals. Thus, if a party's primary goal is to maximize support for preferred positions, bolstering appeals will be pursued. If a party would rather minimize societal discord on an issue, even at the expense of its' preferred policy option, then bridging appeals are superior.

\*\*\*\* Table 3 \*\*\*\*

How do these different message types fair when included as part of a competitive message environment? Table 3 presents estimates of the impact of each message when presented both in isolation and when paired with an appeal from the other party. For both issues, bridging appeals fare much worse when confronted with messages from the other side of the issue. Among Democrats, the Republican bridging appeal has no effect on support for entitlement reform when paired with a counter argument. This effect is the difference in mean support between the control group and the treatment group that received the bridging message as well as a similarly sized counter argument from the Democrats. Thus the Republican counter-polarizing message that has a reasonably large and positive impact in isolation is fully countered by the Democratic appeal among

Democrat identifiers. For global warming, we again see a decrease in the effectiveness of depolarizing messages when faced with an opposition response. Recall that in isolation, the Democrat sponsored bridging appeal has a modest negative effect on support for climate change mitigation (-.07). This negative effect is even greater when the treatment also includes a Republican argument against action (-.16).

Importantly, when presented in a competitive environment, the bridging appeals are no more effective than the bolstering appeals at convincing out-party supporters. For entitlement reform, both bolstering and bridging messages have no effect when paired with Democrat responses. Similarly, the inclusion of a Republican counter argument leaves little difference in the impact of the bolstering (-.13) and bridging (-.16) appeals among out-partisans in the global warming case. The fact that messages from a party are less effective when confronted by a response from the other side is not surprising. Crucially, however, putting forward a bridging appeal results in no additional success in converting likely opponents to the persuading party's position.

In contrast, the entitlement experiment suggests that bolstering appeals continue to be effective at persuading in-party supporters even when the Democrats counter argument is included in the treatment. The impact of the bolstering message among Republicans remains positive and strong (.18). The bridging appeal is also equally effective among Republicans regardless of the presence of a competitive frame. The same basic pattern is evident in the global warming results; there is little difference in message effects when a Republican appeal is included in the treatment. The central finding for Democrats on global warming is, however, that both types of messages are ineffective among in-party supporters (i.e. Democrats). Even when confronted with a clear counter-argument by Republicans (which should make party positions clear and encourage motivated reasoning), the bridging appeal has a negative effect on climate change positions.

\*\*\*\* Table 4 \*\*\*\*

Advocates of counter-polarizing strategies also suggest that such appeals may improve the effectiveness of factual information that ought to increase support for a particular side of the issue. Table 4 presents results from treatment groups that included a statement of factual information where the source of the information is intended to be non-partisan (“the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office” and “the international scientific panel on climate change”). For both issues, exposure to the information alone pushes partisans' policy preferences apart slightly. The entitlements information increases support for action among Democrats by .06 and has a larger effect among Republicans at .10. Climate change information has essentially no effect on Democrats (+.01) and a

boomerang effect on Republicans (-.06).<sup>3</sup> This boomerang effect is consistent with motivated reasoning. Republican respondents are reminded of the parties' positions on the issue and then presented with information that favours the Democrats' position. Accordingly, Republicans have the means and motivation to possibly counter-argue and/or dismiss this information.

Do depolarizing appeals enhance the intended impact of factual information? We find little evidence that they do. Among Republicans, the impact of information when paired with a bridging appeal is near zero (-.01). This effect is the difference in mean support for climate change action between the group receiving only the bridging appeal and the group exposed to both the same appeal and the factual information. Thus the estimates are the impact of information conditional on exposure to a particular appeal. The bridging appeal does have a modest positive impact on the effect of information. The effect of the information statement increases from -.06 to -.01. The difference is, however, relatively small. In the case of entitlement reform, the impact of information on out-partisans, the Democrats, moves from +.06 to +.03 when coupled with a bridging statement. Thus the counter-polarizing effort actually reduces the intended impact of information. In both cases, the moderating effect of bridging appeals on information effects is modest at best.

The final set of results considers the impact of something akin to the flip side of counter-polarizing appeals: partisan attacks. We are interested in whether such attacks exacerbate the polarizing aspects of political debate. Specifically, we test whether partisan attacks enhance partisan polarization by increasing the effectiveness of bolstering appeals among in-party supporters and further limiting the impact of the same appeals among out-partisans. We also consider whether attacks influence the polarizing effect of neutral information.

\*\*\*\* Table 5 \*\*\*\*

Table 5 presents results on the role of partisan attacks. Our design is such that these attacks appear only when paired with a bolstering appeal. Thus we are primarily interested in the effect of attacks given exposure to a standard partisan appeal. For instance, out-partisans who received the bolstering appeal coupled with a partisan attack were much less likely to support entitlement reform than those who received only the bolstering appeal (-.14). Interestingly, the attack provided little benefit among those for whom it is likely intended: in-party supporters. These hostile statements increased

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<sup>3</sup> Across all treatments, there is only one instance where treatments result in increased support for action on climate change among Democrats. The limited influence is likely the product of a ceiling effect. Among Democrats in the control group, mean support for action is 0.86 on the 0-1 scale or 6.02 on the original 7 point scale which indicates 'somewhat strong' support for action. A full 62% of Democrats in the control group take the strongest possible position and a further 24% take the second strongest position.

support for the Republican position by only .02. Similarly, an attack against Republicans had little impact on Democrats who received the bolstering global warming message. The effect is very small and incorrectly signed (-.03). Surprisingly, among Republican respondents, an attack on the Republican party appears to have increased support for climate change action. Mean support for action among Republicans receiving only the bolstering global warming message is .41 and support is .62 among those who received the same message plus an attack on their own party. This result is puzzling to say the least. The difference is large and approaches statistical significance ( $p=.08$ ). The most compelling explanation is sampling error.

The presence of a negative attack may influence the impact of information by stimulating motivated reasoning. If this is the case, then attacks should increase the impact of information among in-party supporters since the information directs them toward the position of the attacking party. For supporters of the party being attacked these statements should decrease the effect of information, or, create and/or enhance a boomerang effect. We find evidence that the attacks do increase the effect of information in the direction desired by the attacking party among in-partisans. Among in-party supporters, the moderating effect of the attack is +.06 among Republicans in the entitlements treatments and +.09 among Democrats exposed to global warming messages. Interestingly, however, the effect of information when paired with a bolstering message is negative in both cases. For instance support for global warming action is lower among Democrats who receive both the bolstering appeal and information compared to those who receive only the bolstering information (-.05). Adding a partisan attack changes the effect of information to +.03 for a moderating effect of +.09.<sup>4</sup>

Turning to out-party supporters, we find evidence consistent with increased motivated reasoning but only for the global warming experiment. Among Republicans in the global warming treatments, information has a positive effect, (+.10) when it is coupled with a bolstering argument. When a partisan attack is added, the effect of information becomes negative (-.11). Among Democrats in the entitlements groups, however, partisan attacks shifts the effect of information in the direction intended by the persuading party. Absent the attack, information has a modest negative effect among Democrats. Adding the attack yields a +.14 point change in the effect of information to +.10. On the whole, three of the

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<sup>4</sup> To clarify, the effect of information given a partisan attack (+.03 in this case) is identified by comparing mean support for climate change policies among those receiving the bolstering appeal and the partisan attack with support among those receiving the bolstering appeal, the attack, and the factual information. These treatments are identical except for the factual information which is present in one and absent in the other. This information effect, however, is conditional on the presence of both a bolstering appeal and a partisan attack. The moderating effect of the attack on information (+.09) is the difference between the information effect in the presence/absence of the partisan attack.

four results presented here are consistent with the claim that attacks against the out-party can increase the polarizing effect of information.

## **Conclusion**

This paper empirically evaluates some of the claims put forward by advocates of counter-polarizing rhetorical strategies. On the whole, we find rather weak support for many of these claims. Critically, bridging messages designed to appeal to the values and goals of out-partisans are no more effective at increasing support among these individuals than standard bolstering messages. Bolstering messages, on the other hand, are clearly more effective among their chief intended audience – a party’s supporters.

We further find that bridging messages become largely ineffective when confronted with a competitive message environment where the other party responds. The effect of bridging appeals is considerably weaker when a counter argument is present. While bolstering arguments also suffer from competition, the decrease in impact is more limited. The impact of bridging appeals on out-partisans is particularly relevant to theories of counter-polarizing rhetoric. When presented in tandem with a counter argument, bridging appeals are largely ineffective among out-partisans. There is no effect among Democrats in the entitlements groups and a sizeable boomerang effect among Republicans exposed to global warming appeals.

Bridging appeals also do not appear to have an ameliorative moderating effect on the impact of factual information. The impact of information among out-partisans is very modestly affected by the presence of a bridging appeal. The presence of such appeals modestly decreases the boomerang effect of global warming information on Republicans and a bridging message reduces the desired effect of entitlements information among Democrats.

We also find that bolstering appeals were more effective at increasing net support for the persuading party’s policy position among partisans. While these standard political appeals do result in greater partisan polarization, they also maximize the number of individuals who prefer the communicating party’s position. Thus while bridging appeals can yield a potentially normatively desirable decrease in partisan polarization, selecting such appeals is at odds with a parties’ primary interest – policy change.

Finally, we considered the impact that negative partisan attacks have when included with standard bolstering appeals. We find that such attacks do not have additional benefits among those who identify with the attacking party. We also find fairly strong evidence that demeaning the out-party increases motivated processing of factual information

among all partisans and thus increases the polarizing effect that such information can have.

In general, these findings suggest that efforts by political parties to appeal to supporters of opposing parties rarely benefit the persuading party. Fruitful efforts to diminish motivated reasoning and increase the rationality of public opinion are more likely to be found elsewhere. With evidence that encouraging accuracy, rather than partisan, motivations mounting (e.g. Bolsen et al 2014), research into how the content of political appeals might decrease polarization and increase the effect of factual information might usefully consider whether partisan appeals can be crafted to induce citizens to pursue an accurate opinion.

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## **Treatment Materials**

Treatments:

1. Control: Control statement only
2. Bolstering: Control statement + Bolstering appeal
3. Bridging: Control statement + Bridging appeal
4. Information: Control statement + Information
5. Bolstering - competitive: Control statement + Bolstering appeal + out-party response
6. Bridging - competitive: Control statement + Bridging appeal + out party response
7. Bolstering w/ information: Control statement + Bolstering appeal + Information
8. Bridging w/information: Control statement + Bridging appeal + Information

## **CLIMATE CHANGE TREATMENTS**

### **Control**

There has been a lot of discussion in Washington about global warming. Most Democrats call for strong government measures to cut emissions of greenhouse gases and help control global warming. Most Republicans say these measures are not needed and oppose them.

### **Bolstering**

Democrats say:

- Global warming is a serious problem and will affect everyone. It will have terrible effects on some of the world's most defenseless people, especially in Africa and Asia.
- It will destroy habitats for many plants and animals, and make many species go extinct.
- Global warming will cause more severe droughts and heat waves. These weather events will hurt farming and weaken the economy. More frequent violent storms, such as hurricanes and tornadoes, will destroy property and cause deaths.

### **Bridging**

Democrats say:

- Some Republicans agree that global warming is a real problem and that we need reasonable, responsible action.
- It is crucial to avoid harming business and the economy. Climate change policies must be designed to reduce the impact on business as much as possible.

- Uncontrolled global warming will cause droughts that severely hurt agricultural production. Heat waves, severe storms, and rising sea levels will take lives, destroy property, and damage our economy.

### **Partisan attack**

Democrats say:

- Republicans who oppose acting on global warming simply don't understand reality, like people who believe that the earth is flat!
- Republicans don't care about the harm they will do, as long as they can collect huge campaign contributions from special interests like big oil and gas companies.

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Democrats also say:

- Global warming is a serious problem and will affect everyone. It will have terrible effects on some of the world's most defenseless people, especially in Africa and Asia.
- It will destroy habitats for many plants and animals, and make many species go extinct.
- Global warming will cause more severe droughts and heat waves. These weather events will hurt farming and weaken the economy. More frequent violent storms, such as hurricanes and tornadoes, will destroy property and cause deaths.

### **Out-party response**

Republicans say:

- Scientists don't all agree that the earth is getting warmer or that humans are causing it.
- The Democrats' global warming policies would mean a huge increase in government regulation and bureaucracy.
- These policies would raise costs for businesses and consumers and would hurt employment and economic growth.

### **Factual Information**

Democrats point to findings in the latest report from the international scientific panel on climate change:

- Scientists are now even more confident about the causes of global warming. The report says it is just as certain that human activity causes global warming as it is that cigarettes cause cancer.

- Harmful effects of global warming -- like droughts, floods, heat waves, hurricanes and tornados, and losses of food production -- are happening sooner and are more severe than expected.
- We are already suffering serious consequences and they will continue to become more severe.
- The need to control greenhouse gases has become even more urgent.

## **ENTITLEMENT REFORM TREATMENTS**

### **Control**

There is a lot of discussion in Washington about proposals to reduce the costs of so-called “entitlement programs,” such as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and food stamps. These programs provide benefits to many people. But they cost a great deal of money and these costs will increase in the coming decades. Republicans call for major cuts to the benefits people receive in order to reduce the long-term growth in the cost of these programs. Democrats generally oppose major cuts in spending on these programs.

### **Bolstering**

Republicans say:

- Entitlement programs make people dependent on government, and take away their freedom to make their own choices.
- Many of the people who receive benefits don’t need or deserve support from the government; they should take responsibility for themselves.
- Spending on these programs is out of control and will lead to higher taxes, bigger deficits, and burdensome debt. All of this will hurt our economy and destroy jobs.

### **Bridging**

Republicans say:

- Some Democrats understand the seriousness of the deficit problem and support major cuts to some of these programs.
- It is crucial to avoid harming our seniors and poor people who are truly in need. Reductions in benefits must be done in a way that avoids unnecessary harm to people who depend on these programs.
- Spending on these programs is out of control and will lead to higher taxes, bigger deficits, and burdensome debt. All of this will hurt our economy and destroy jobs.

### **Partisan attack**

Republicans say:

- Democrats who oppose reforming entitlement programs simply don't understand reality, like people who believe that the earth is flat!
- Democrats don't care about the harm they will do, as long as they can reward their supporters with government handouts.

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Republicans also say:

- Entitlement programs make people dependent on government, and take away their freedom to make their own choices.
- Many of the people who receive benefits don't need or deserve support from the government; they should take responsibility for themselves.
- Spending on these programs is out of control and will lead to higher taxes, bigger deficits, and burdensome debt. All of this will hurt our economy and destroy jobs.

### **Out-party response**

Democrats say:

- Major cuts in entitlement programs will hurt people who are in need of these benefits.
- These cuts are not needed. The main cause of the long-term deficit problem has been Republican tax cuts for the wealthy.
- We should require wealthy Americans to pay their fair share, not balance the budget on the backs of the poor and the elderly.

### **Factual Information**

Republicans point to findings in the latest report from the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office:

- The federal government's long-term budget path is "unsustainable." A major reason is that spending for entitlement programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid has increased as a share of the economy by almost 50% since 2000.
- Unless policies are changed, that spending will grow even more rapidly, and in 25 years, these programs will account for 80% of domestic spending.
- Spending in all other domestic areas -- such as education, law enforcement, and scientific research will have to shrink. And the growing national debt will undermine economic growth.

## Tables

Table 1: Experimental groups and descriptive statistics.

<b>Treatment</b>	Global Warming			Entitlement Reform		
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std.Dev</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std.Dev</i>	<i>N</i>
Control	0.73	0.33	65	0.29	0.38	61
Bolstering	0.68	0.39	63	0.43	0.40	64
Bridging	0.64	0.35	60	0.37	0.37	54
Information	0.71	0.33	68	0.40	0.37	69
Bolstering & Information	0.68	0.35	60	0.38	0.39	55
Bridging & Information	0.71	0.36	64	0.43	0.38	65
Bolstering - competitive	0.70	0.34	58	0.36	0.39	72
Bridging - competitive	0.59	0.35	49	0.33	0.38	67
Hostile	0.79	0.29	56	0.35	0.39	75
Hostile & Information	0.78	0.31	61	0.40	0.39	69
Hostile - competitive	0.65	0.39	52	0.40	0.43	56

Table 2: The effect of bolstering and bridging appeals across partisan groups

	Global Warming			Entitlement Reform		
	In-party	Out-party	All partisans	In-party	Out-party	All partisans
Bolstering	0.05 (0.05)	-0.14 (0.10)	-0.04 (0.05)	0.20 (0.12)	0.10 (0.07)	0.14 (0.05)
Bridging	-0.10 (0.06)	-0.07 (0.10)	-0.09 (0.06)	0.06 (0.12)	0.09 (0.07)	0.07 (0.07)

Table 3: Bolstering and bridging appeals in competitive message environments

	Global Warming		Entitlement Reform	
	In-party	Out-party	In-party	Out-party
Bolstering - alone	0.05 (0.05)	-0.14 (0.10)	0.20 (0.12)	0.10 (0.07)
Bolstering - competitive	0.01 (0.05)	-0.13 (0.10)	0.18 (0.11)	-0.0001 (0.06)
Difference	-0.03 (0.05)	0.004 (0.11)	-0.02 (0.11)	-0.9 (0.06)
Bridging - alone	-0.1 (0.06)	-0.07 (0.10)	0.06 (0.12)	0.09 (0.07)
Bridging - competitive	-0.1 (0.07)	-0.16 (0.10)	0.05 (0.11)	0.004 (0.06)
Difference	-0.009 (0.07)	-0.09 (0.10)	-0.1 (0.11)	-0.8 (0.07)

Table 4: The moderating effect of appeal type on information effects

	Global Warming		Entitlement Reform	
	In-party	Out-party	In-party	Out-party
Information only	0.01 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.10)	0.10 (0.10)	0.06 (0.07)
Information   Bolstering	-0.05 (0.06)	0.11 (0.10)	-0.09 (0.12)	-0.04 (0.07)
Difference	-0.06 (0.08)	0.17 (0.14)	-0.20 (0.15)	-0.10 (0.10)
Information   Bridging	0.12 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.10)	0.07 (0.11)	0.03 (0.08)
Difference	0.11 (0.07)	0.05 (0.14)	-0.04 (0.15)	-0.04 (0.10)

Table 5: The effects of partisan attacks

	Global Warming		Entitlement Reform	
	In-party	Out-party	In-party	Out-party
Bolstering + Attack	-0.03 (0.045)	0.21 (0.117)	0.02 (0.102)	-0.14 (0.056)
Information   Bolstering	-0.05 (0.057)	0.11 (0.097)	-0.09 (0.115)	-0.04 (0.073)
Information   (Bolstering+Attack)	0.03 (0.04)	-0.1 (0.121)	-0.03 (0.093)	0.1 (0.057)
Difference	0.09 (0.067)	-0.20 (0.155)	0.06 (0.15)	0.14 (0.092)