

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

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## Abstract

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

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Can cues from international policy experts—individuals with specialized knowledge about international affairs—sway public opinion on questions of international cooperation? If so, are cues from experts with domain-relevant knowledge more persuasive than cues from experts whose knowledge is further afield? How might political context condition the influence of these knowledge elites? Communities of international policy experts rely on publishing op-eds, letter-writing campaigns, surveys of expert communities, and ad buying in major newspapers to bring attention to consensus in their fields. Past work suggests that these efforts can be effective (Guisinger and Saunders 2017), but relatively little is known about how the public weighs the judgments of international policy experts against the views of partisan political leaders. To our knowledge, moreover, no past work has studied how cues from knowledge elites and political leaders interact in a fully crossed design in which the effects of endorsements and denouncements by partisan elites and experts can be studied independently and in combination. This is important since the effect of endorsements and denouncements on public opinion are not symmetrical; denouncements have a stronger effect than otherwise identical endorsements (Soroka 2006; Maliniak, Parajon, Powers 2021).

Many observers note a decline in the role of expert voices in policy debates. Tom Nichols (2017) argues that there has been a “surge in narcissistic and misguided intellectual egalitarianism” at the expense of expertise, and this “has crippled informed debates on any number of issues.” The Trump administration’s hostility toward science and its propensity to label anything it disagreed with as “fake news” likely exacerbated this trend by giving people the vocabulary and social cover to reject expertise when it conflicts with their pre-existing preferences. Despite declining respect for experts and expertise, knowledge elites continue to

insert themselves into public debates in numerous ways to, and in the belief that they can, influence public and expert views.

We know little, however, about the role that experts play in shaping public opinion on important foreign policy questions when those views are weighed alongside cues from political elites. Indeed, the literature on cues in American politics often focuses on partisan cues, while work in international relations (IR) has more often emphasized expert cues. In reality, however, members of the public rarely encounter such cues in isolation. A small number of scholars have explored the interaction of expert and partisan cues (e.g., Guisinger and Sanders 2017; Maliniak et al. 2020). To our knowledge, however, there are no causally identified tests of the proposition that the degree of alignment between knowledge elites' and political elites' views moderates the effectiveness of cues from either group on foreign and international policy.

Our study fills this gap. Its major contribution is empirical, although it also brings together the numerous variables explored individually in the existing literature into a cohesive argument about the effects of elite cues on public opinion on foreign policy issues. Elite cues—from experts and political leaders, experts with domain-specific knowledge, and co-partisans in the form of endorsements and denouncements—provide information that corrects factual misperceptions and bolsters recipients' social identities, leading to change in opinion and policy preferences.

Because both partisan elites and experts are strategic in their use of such cues, understanding their independent effect on mass attitudes is difficult using observational data. We use pre-registered, scenario-based survey experiments fielded 3500 Americans to explore the question of how expert cues interact with those from partisan political actors.<sup>1</sup> We study how

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<sup>1</sup> We focus on the United States because of its outsized importance in world affairs, but we anticipate that the results are likely to travel well to other democracies.

public support for hypothetical multilateral agreements in the areas of trade, security, and climate varies in response to endorsements and/or denouncements from international policy experts, partisan political leaders, or both. By manipulating whether respondents learn about the views of either experts or political leaders on a proposed agreement, or both, as well as whether the elites support or oppose the agreement, we can learn about the effect of expert and political cues in isolation and, crucially, in context.

We find that, on average, cues from experts can move the public just as much as cues from political elites and that cues denouncing proposed agreements are generally more potent than otherwise identical cues from the same actors endorsing the policy and that domain-relevant knowledge can make expert endorsements more powerful than otherwise identical endorsements from experts without domain-relevant expertise. We also document important counterbalancing effects that occur when knowledge and political elites disagree on the wisdom or folly of a given policy and reinforcing effects when the experts and political elites agree. Finally, we find that messages from co-partisan elites are particularly powerful, but this party match effect is concentrated among Republicans. Democratic respondents were more or less equally swayed by cues from political elites of both major parties. We see further evidence consistent with reactive devaluation among Republicans who receive cues from political elites identified as Democrats (Ross 1995; Nyhan and Reifler 2010).

Taken together, our results offer new insights into the role that experts can play in shaping public opinion on key foreign policy initiatives. Most fundamentally, they suggest that sharing expert views on proposed policies with the public can and does have important effects on public support for those policies. At the same time, our results suggest a structural advantage for experts and political leaders who wish to move the public against new policies. Indeed, the

largest treatment effects we observed were in the case of a denouncement from experts combined with a denouncement from a partisan political leader. The results also suggest a structural disadvantage for Democratic presidents pursuing new international cooperative endeavors. Because Republicans react against endorsements from Democratic leaders, but there is no parallel effect for Democrats, Republican political leaders may draw support for new international policy initiatives from bipartisan coalitions of voters, while Democratic leaders may need to rely more heavily on support from voters in their own party. This likely makes international policy change harder to secure *ex ante* and lowers the perceived legitimacy of the resulting policy *ex post*. Our paper thus documents an important place for knowledge elites in our understanding of the effect of public opinion on foreign policy, but it also highlights the potential for political actors and the public alike to strategically invoke or discount expertise in pursuit of their desired policy goals or to simply express their partisan or ideological identity.

### **Elites and Public Opinion on Foreign Policy**

Scholars have long considered the question of what shapes public opinion on foreign policy. Much of this work focuses on the central role of political and media elites. Early studies of American public opinion generally concluded that the public was uninterested in and uninformed about political issues, and public opinion was therefore highly volatile (e.g., Lippman 1955; Almond 1950). More recent and systematic work characterizes US public opinion as relatively rational and stable: the public updates its foreign policy attitudes more or less in response to information about events in world affairs (e.g., Mueller 1973, Page and Shapiro 1982; Holsti 1992; Alrdich et al 1989). This work notwithstanding, the general public still evidences a lack of interest in and knowledge of policy, especially foreign policy (e.g., Delli

Carpini and Keeter 1991). Instead, they often rely on cues from elites either directly or mediated through the news media to form their foreign policy views (i.e., Zaller 1992; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Cohen 2003; Berinsky 2009; Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014). This is particularly true in the case of complicated policy issues (Nicholson 2011).

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

A second explanation for how elite cues shape public opinion focuses on motivated rather than strategic reasoning. According to this social psychological perspective, members of the public are motivated to preserve, reinforce, and express their social identities. Elite cues shape public opinion when they confirm values that citizens already hold and that they share with others—that is, when cues express and bolster recipients' identification with a particular social group (e.g., Kahan 2011, 2013). This effect is most pronounced on issues on which political parties are in conflict (Slothuus and de Vreese 2010).

The debate between rational choice and social psychological approaches to the influence of elite cues on public opinion often pits arguments about the source of a cue against claims that it is the information contained in the cue, rather than its source, that influences citizens' views (Bullock 2011; Nicholson 2011). As Guisinger and Sanders (2017) note, the question “is whether the message or the messenger is more important: Do elites convey substantive information, or do they instead signal partisan [i.e., identity] positions that respondents can simply adopt without considering policy details?”

In this paper we ask related but different questions: whose message matters, and when? Both the rational choice and social psychological literatures suggest that elite cues matter. At the same time, the public does not treat cues from all actors equally. To be effective, rational choice theorists and social psychologists agree, such cues must come from credible sources (Druckman 2001; Kahan et al. 2011). For an elite actor to be credible and influence opinion depends on either or both the perceived commonality of interest and the perceived expertise of the cue-giver (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). This leads us to ask which elites have a greater influence on public opinion—partisan leaders or knowledge experts.

### *Commonality of Interest: Partisan elites*

The legitimacy of political authority generally rests on the perception of shared values, beliefs, and interests. In democratic political systems membership in political parties provides a powerful signal of these common views, since by design parties are intended to represent groups of interests. In the United States, the cue-giver's ideological or partisan identity provides one of the most salient indicators of whether a cue giver shares one's interests. As Westwood et al. (2017) note, “Because partisan affiliation is voluntary, it is a much more informative measure of

attitudes and belief structures than, for example, knowing what skin color someone has.” For rational choice theorists, partisan cues can influence public preferences because they provide the kind of shortcut that informationally disadvantaged members of the public need to formulate policy preferences on foreign policy issues; a partisan affinity between the source and receiver of a cue provides information on what someone who shares their beliefs about other issues, but has access to more information, thinks about a particular issue. For social psychologists, similarly partisan cues communicate information to members of the public about what others who share their partisan and/or ideological views believe. A political or ideological match between the sender and the receiver of a cue, in short, helps the receiver to frame an issue; it also can moderate the effects of previous cues (Hartman and Weber 2009).

Like partisan elites, issue-area experts sometimes may derive influence from partisan or ideological signals but more often are presented as nonpartisan. Experiments conducted by Guisinger and Saunders (2017) identify a key way in which expert views are communicated to the public: media coverage of foreign policy debates features commentary by experts at think tanks that have a distinct ideological brand, and that brand is communicated to readers (see Merkley 2020). More often, experts are featured in media coverage without partisan or ideological markers.

### *Perceived Expertise: Knowledge elites*

It is the very lack of partisan or ideological markers that signals experts’ independence and objectivity, although IR scholars are less likely to consider the impact of cues from knowledge elites than from partisan elites. Members of the public may shift their views because they believe that elites have knowledge that allows them to understand the consequences of



different policies and to make informed decisions. These elites may be publicly identified as having advanced degrees or being the author of relevant books or articles, or affiliated with a prestigious, issue-specific think tank, research institute, or academic department at a college or university. These markers help establish that the individual has specialized and credible knowledge about the topic at hand and is using that knowledge to inform their policy commentary or recommendations. These markers of independence also help indicate that the expert is not on the take; they are endorsing or denouncing a given policy because their action is consistent with the findings of independent research, not because it would benefit them, their party, or their donors.

Expert cues are expected to shape public opinion for both informational and identity reasons. Rational choice theorists emphasize that the public understands their informational disadvantage relative to other relevant actors. The public believes that scholars, members of Congress, and journalists are more knowledgeable about climate change than the average member of the public (Maliniak et al. 2020). Expert cues provide a shortcut for citizens to close the information gap. For social identity theorists cues from knowledge elites also provide information, but they influence recipients' views when they resonate with and reinforce social identities, such as party identification or ideology. For both approaches, then, knowledge elites can shape public opinion on foreign policy.

A burgeoning literature explores the impact of knowledge elites—scientists, academics, or researchers with specialized knowledge of a particular subject—on public opinion. Much of this work investigates public attitudes on scientific issues, especially climate change, and the effect of communications about scientific consensus on citizens' views. For the most part, the experimental evidence from these studies reveals that expert cues matter, that expert cues

increase public awareness of scientific consensus and shape policy preferences on climate change (e.g., Malka et al. 2009; van der Linden 2015; Bolen and Druckman 2016). A smaller set of studies finds, however, that individuals' beliefs about scientific consensus and therefore their policy views are shaped by their (largely partisan) values (e.g., Kahan et al. 2011). Climate change dominates the scholarship on the role of knowledge elites, but a handful of scholars are beginning to extend this analysis to other issues, like vaccine use (Kerr and van der Linden 2022; Nyhan and Reifler 2014). Scant research exists within the social sciences on the impact of knowledge elites (exceptions include Bullock 2011; Nicholson 2011; Johnston and Ballard 2016), especially on foreign policy or international cooperation issues (for exceptions see Guisinger and Saunders 2017; Maliniak et al. 2020).

At least four characteristics of expert cues emerge from this existing work as potentially important for understanding the impact of knowledge elites. First, it is expert consensus that matters; most of the experimental evidence for the influence of knowledge elites on public opinion comes not from the cues of individual experts but from information about expert consensus (e.g. Bolsen and Druckman 2018; Johnston and Ballard 2016; Kahan 2011). Second, there is suggestive evidence that members of the public look for domain-relevant expertise as they consider how to respond to expert cues. Citizens update more when learning, for example, that economists opposed a trade agreement than when learning that climate scientists oppose the same agreement (Maliniak et al. 2020). Third, Maliniak et al. (2020) also find strong evidence that the valence of the cue matters: negative cues from experts have larger effects than otherwise identical positive cues, suggesting that the conclusions we draw about the influence of experts and political elites alike may depend on whether elites are endorsing or denouncing a particular proposal. Finally, expert cues do not occur in isolation. Darmofal (2005) argues, for instance,

that the extent to which political elites are aligned with experts on a given policy determines whether expert opinion can shape public opinion.

### *Co-Partisanship and Backlash*

Most studies of the effect of elite endorsements on public opinion find either that such cues increase support for policies, especially in the foreign policy realm. In the case of cues from partisan elites, however, there also is evidence that such endorsements sometimes fail to have their intended effect. Some students of public opinion have found a “backfire” or “backlash” effect in which individuals move, not in the direction of elite cues, but away from them (Bolsen and Druckman 2018; Hartman and Weber 2009; Lupia 1994; Merkley and Stecula 2021; Nyhan and Reifler 2010, 2014; Zhou 2016). Reactive devaluation, “the fact that the very offer of a particular proposal or concession—especially if the offer comes from an adversary—may diminish its apparent value or attractiveness in the eyes of the recipient” (Ross 1995), is one mechanism through which this might occur. Zaller (1992, 267) calls this “partisan resistance.” Brutger (2021) finds evidence for such effects when considering public support for international agreements; proposals from foreign leaders are discounted by some portion of the public compared to identical proposals made by a U.S. president.

Backfire effects raise the possibility that cues from communities of experts or partisan elites may have polarizing effects. Citizens may move away from a position advocated by elites because the information provided by the cue clarifies the policy issue and correct factual misperceptions (e.g., Nyhan and Reifler 2010) or because the new information conveys social meaning (e.g., Cohen 2003). Recent research suggests, however, that such backfire effects may be relatively rare (Coppock and Guess 2018).

### *Knowledge Elites in Political Context*

Neither partisan nor expert cues occur in a vacuum. The public may be on the receiving end of cues from experts and political elites at the same time. Political elites may strategically use expert knowledge, moreover, and experts may strategically choose to inject their beliefs into public debates, making the effect of each of these actors hard to assess observationally. In an important study, Guisinger and Saunders (2017) use survey experiments to study how attaching partisan affiliations to expert cues in nine real-world policies affects the relative power of such cues. They find that the effects of cues vary systematically across issue areas depending on the pre-existing level of support among the public and the degree to which the issue already was polarized along partisan lines. Guisinger and Saunders assign expert and partisan identities to the *same* individuals, however, and both the identity of the experts and the valence of the cues they provide vary in idiosyncratic ways across the issue areas they study, making it difficult to ascertain whether the issue area dynamics they document arise because of variation in features of the issue area, features of the experts, or the valence of the expert cues.

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

### *Hypotheses*

Marrying the logics of rational choice theory and social psychology in the literature on the effects of elite cues on public opinion suggests the following hypotheses about the role of expert endorsements and denouncements of proposed international treaties:<sup>2</sup>

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

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

**Political Elites (H2a) :** Endorsements (denouncements) from political elites will increase (decrease) the support.

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

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

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

### **Strategic Behavior of Political and Knowledge Elites**

Part of the difficulty of studying the relative influence of expert cues on public opinion about foreign policy derives from the fact that both political and knowledge elites are strategic actors who may use experts and expertise for political ends. Political elites' advocacy of foreign policy initiatives often features direct references to the views of knowledge elites. Indeed,

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<sup>2</sup> Note that we renumbered our hypotheses relative to our pre-analysis plan for presentational reasons.

partisan actors often go out of their way to highlight their alignment with experts when it exists, but they also may strategically omit references to experts or even dismiss experts' views when they disagree. President Obama (2014) invoked expert consensus on climate change in his 2014 State of the Union Address, for example, while President Trump cast doubt on expert consensus on the relationship between the increasing incidence of wildfires and climate change, saying, "I don't think science knows, actually" (Lemire et al. 2020). Denying that experts agree is one common tactic; another is to strategically select experts who lack domain-relevant expertise but are willing to publicly endorse the political elite's preferred policy. The interaction of partisan elite and knowledge elite cues, especially the strategic use of tactics like association, denial, and cherry picking, make it difficult to judge from observational studies the extent to which partisan and expert cues are effective.

Political elites are strategic in their use and abuse of expertise, but knowledge elites are not passive actors. Experts on foreign and international policy often issue community-level endorsements or denouncements of key foreign policy initiatives. These may come in the form of joint communiques, broader open letters, or community-wide surveys. Perhaps because their area of expertise is so often the target of misinformation campaigns led by political elites, climate scientists routinely issue joint statements and open letters on the dangers of anthropogenic climate change. Some scientific societies also have issued statements or reports affirming the scientific consensus on this issue (Scientific Consensus, n.d.). In many cases, however, groups of climate experts seek to mobilize the public directly. In a recent open letter to the *New York Times*, for example, 130 climate experts documented important errors and omissions in a 2020 column on climate change by a conservative commentator and asked members of the public to sign a petition.

Economists often publicly express support for particular international trade and investment agreements or opposition to efforts to curtail cross-border economic exchange. In a 1993 letter endorsing the North American Free Trade Agreement, which received front-page coverage in the *New York Times*, economists sought to influence the debate by invoking expert consensus: “When economists of every stripe agree on anything, it is noteworthy. So it is a sign of unusual accord that 300 economists...recently signed a letter to President Clinton supporting the North American Free Trade Agreement” (Nasar 1993). Led by the National Taxpayers Union, in May 2018 a group of 1,100 economists adopted a similar tactic; they signed an open letter opposing the Trump administration’s use of tariffs and other protectionist measures. The letter prominently featured the names and affiliations of the most well-known signatories drawn from across the ideological spectrum and including several Nobel Prize winners (“More than 1,100 economists”). These aspects of the letter suggest that knowledge elites rely on markers that differentiate them from political elites and help communicate their independence and expertise.

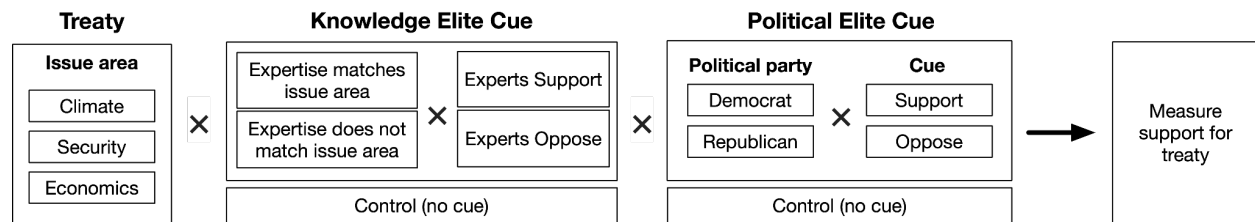
Another increasingly common effort involves systematic or elite surveys of experts. The University of Chicago US Economic Experts Panel frequently surveys academic economists and former economic policy makers on key questions of national and international economic policy, and results are routinely cited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

These examples of political elites’ selective use of expert knowledge and experts’ strategic decisions to enter political debates suggest both the prominence of expert opinion in public debates and the challenges of studying the interaction of partisan and expert cues

observationally. They also highlight, however, the need to understand the impact of expert cues, alone and in combination with partisan cues, on public opinion.

## Experimental Design

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



**Figure 1:** *Study Design*



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



We embedded a vignette-based experiment in a survey of 3,500 Americans recruited by Qualtrics and fielded between July 17 and August 13, 2018.<sup>3</sup> We focus on the United States because of its outsized influence in world affairs but anticipate that the results would travel well to other national contexts where experts and partisan elites can compete for mass influence in the public sphere. Indeed, while their focus is different, Delmuth et al. (2022), show that views of international organizations are remarkably stable across national contexts and issue areas and driven more by individual level dispositions than particular national features.

Although our sample is not representative of the public as a whole, we used quotas based on the U.S. census for age, gender, and location to ensure we had access to a diverse cross-section of the US public.<sup>4</sup> The experiment is designed to allow us to observe how public support for international agreements varies in response to support for or opposition to the agreements by experts and/or political leaders. We described to respondents a hypothetical international agreement in one of three issue areas (trade, climate, security), characterized for respondents the level of support the agreement enjoys among experts and/or partisan political leaders, and then asked respondents to report their level of support for the hypothetical agreement. Each respondent completed a version of the vignette experiment three times, once for each issue area. We structured the vignettes in the following way. First, we outlined the agreement in general terms and implied that the future of the agreement is still uncertain. This portion of the vignette read:

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

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<sup>3</sup> See Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz (2012) and Coppock and McClellan (2019) for discussion of the promise of online convenience samples. They show that such samples return estimated treatment effects of similar magnitude and direction as those observed in samples recruited using more traditional methods.

<sup>4</sup> The distribution of age, gender, location, and income is presented in Table 1 of the Appendix.

Second, we randomly assigned respondents to one of several treatment groups, which received information about experts' views on the agreement, or to a control group, which received no information about experts' views. In the treatment groups, respondents learned whether experts supported or opposed the agreements. We randomly varied both the experts' subject-matter expertise and whether they were overwhelmingly supportive or overwhelmingly opposed to the proposed agreement.<sup>5</sup> This portion of the vignette read:

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

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

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

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<sup>5</sup> Although we described the scenarios as hypothetical from the outset, we debriefed respondents at the end of the survey, explaining that the survey results and political leaders' arguments were fictitious. We explained why we used fictitious information and provided links to reputable sources, so that interested respondents could learn more about experts views on contemporary policy issues. The complete debrief text is in the Appendix.

encounter the views of government leaders.<sup>6</sup> The treatments in the trade agreement condition, for example, read:

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

Immediately following treatment, we measured support for the agreement by asking, “Do you support or oppose the United States joining the pending trade agreement?” Respondents indicated their level of support on a seven-point scale from “oppose a great deal” to “support a great deal,” with a “neither support nor oppose” option in the middle. We also asked respondents two questions about the expected effect of the agreement, one about whether they expected the agreement to be good or bad for them personally and another asking if it would be good or bad for the country as a whole. This design is high-dimensional, but, with the exception of our domain-expertise and co-partisan-effects hypotheses, our analysis focuses on the main or joint effect of endorsements and/or denouncements from knowledge elites and/or partisan elites averaged across the three issue areas.

## Results

### *Effect of expert cues on support for cooperation*

We begin by estimating the main effect of exposure to expert endorsements or denouncements on support for the proposed agreement relative to a control condition that did not expose respondents to any cues(**H1a**). Recall that each respondent participated in three rounds of

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<sup>6</sup> It is not clear, moreover, how to think about comparing the dosages of expert and partisan cues that respondents receive. It is unclear, in other words, how a cue from a single partisan elite compares to a cue from a single knowledge elite.

the experiment (one for each issue area) in random order. We pool the responses and estimate treatment effects relative to the pure control baseline (i.e., no cues from either political or knowledge elites) with standard errors clustered by respondent. The results presented graphically in Figure 3 show that the *Experts Support* treatment had a small positive but statistically insignificant effect on support for the agreement (.06,  $p = .491$ ), while the *Experts Oppose* treatment had a large and negative effect (-.73 points on our 7-point scale,  $p < .000$ ). The negative effect is equivalent to about a 17-percent reduction (95%: 11.8, 22.0;  $p < .000$ ) in support for the agreement. We take these results as qualified support for **H1a**. Experts can have important effects on public support for international cooperation, but it is expert opposition to proposed agreements that is likely to be most salient and powerful.

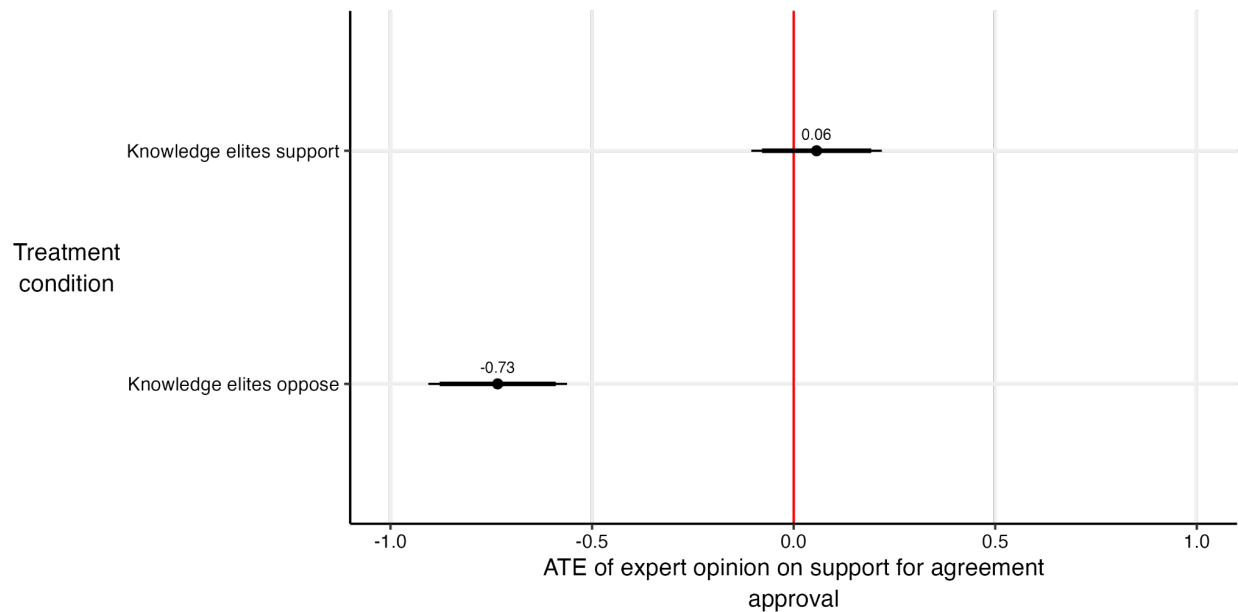
The null effects we observe among the positive endorsements may stem from any of at least three sources.<sup>7</sup> First, they may be the result of ceiling effects in which a large proportion of the respondent pool came into the experiment ready to support any proposed international agreement, so inducing an increase in support relative to the control group was not possible. This is unlikely in our view because the average level of support for the international agreements in the control group was 5.2 (95% CI: 5.07, 5.36), giving us nearly 2 full points of headroom on our 7-point scale to observe movement if the positive treatments were effective. Second, the null result could reflect respondents' pre-existing beliefs that policy experts would support almost any proposed international agreement, so the treatments provided no new information. We do not have the data needed to test directly for this effect, but it strikes us as an unsatisfying explanation at best. Although it is possible that many respondents anticipated that climate scholars would

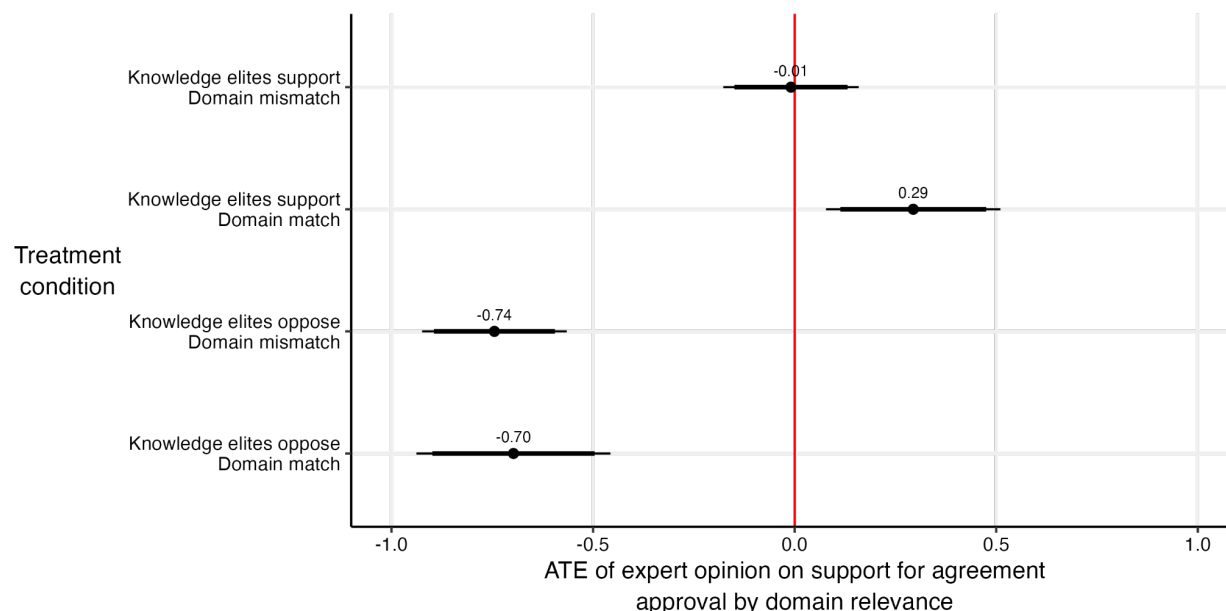
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<sup>7</sup> In the appendix, we show that recall rates for the level of expert support/opposition to the agreement were high (around 61 percent on average across the three experiments). If respondents answered our recall question at random, we would expect a recall rate of 25 percent.

support most climate agreements, it does not seem plausible that the public would anticipate the same level of consensus support among trade or security experts. As we show below, the effect of learning about expert support for the various agreements does not vary in a manner consistent with the public having a common expectation of consensus support for all agreements among all issue area experts. The final and, in our view, most plausible explanation for this null result on the experts' support treatments is that elite cues are subject to a significant negativity bias in which respondents are more sensitive to denouncements than they are to endorsements from otherwise identical cue givers (Soroka 2014). We see a similar asymmetry below in our analysis of cues from political elites.

**Figure 3:** *Effect of knowledge elite cues*



**Figure 4:** *Effect of domain-relevant expertise*

*Is the effect of expert cues moderated by domain relevance?*

To investigate whether the public updates more significantly in response to cues from domain-specific experts, we recode the knowledge elite treatments as coming from experts who either have or do not have knowledge relevant to the substantive issue of the treaty under consideration.<sup>8</sup> We again estimate treatment effects using OLS and present the results in Figure 4. They provide qualified support for **H1b**.

Those who received the *Knowledge Elites Oppose* treatment from experts with domain-relevant expertise were about .74 points (95% CI: .57, .93;  $p < .000$ ) less supportive of the treaty on our 7-point scale relative to a pure control condition in which respondents were exposed to either no knowledge or political elite cues. The treatment effect among those who received the same treatment but from experts with expertise particular to the substantive issue area of the

<sup>8</sup> In the appendix, we show that respondents perceive economists to be more knowledgeable on trade, climate scholars on climate, and security scholars on international security issues.

treaty under consideration was of a nearly identical magnitude. They were about .7 points (95% CI: .46, .94;  $p < .000$ ) less supportive of the treaty on our 7-point scale. The difference between these two is not statistically significant, suggesting that respondents were not more swayed by a cue from experts with directly relevant knowledge. As above, these differences are both roughly equivalent to a 17-percentage-point drop in support for the proposed treaty.

Turning our attention to the *Knowledge Elites Support* treatments, we see that cues from those with directly relevant knowledge increase support for the treaty by about .29 points (95% CI: .07, .51;  $p = .007$ ), while cues from those without directly relevant knowledge had no discernible effect on treaty support (-.01 points on our 7-point scale; 95% CI: -.18, .16). In contrast to the null effect of domain-relevant knowledge in the *Knowledge Elites Oppose* conditions, domain-relevant knowledge appears to play an important role when it comes to endorsements. Domain-relevant knowledge increases the effect of the *Knowledge Elites Endorse* treatment by .303 points (95% CI: .12, .49) on our 7-point scale. This effect is statistically significant ( $p = .001$ ), but perhaps only marginally so in substantive terms. Endorsements from knowledge elites with domain-relevant expertise increase support by about 5 percentage points relative to endorsements from knowledge elites without such expertise. As we show in the Appendix, recall rates for the issue area of experts was about 50-55 percent on average, suggesting that this feature of the treatment was not overwhelmingly salient to many respondents. We take these results as qualified support for **H1b** but note that more research is needed on this front.

Domain-relevant expertise appears to be an advantage in the case of endorsements, but there are no analogous effects in the case of oppositional cues, suggesting that negativity bias is the driving force in that setting. Expressions of opposition from any quarter of expertise can

erode support for new international treaties. These results suggest a structural advantage for those opposed to new international cooperation initiatives both because oppositional cues from experts appear strong and because domain-relevant expertise appears to be less important in this context. Only when experts are endorsing a given initiative do we find appreciable differences between those with domain-relevant expertise and those without such expertise.

*Effect of cues from elected officials on support for cooperation*

Thus far we have seen that the public is sensitive to experts' views but that this is much more the case when the experts announce their opposition to proposed international agreements than when they announce their support. We now assess the extent to which those effects are moderated by placing them in the context of information about the views of partisan elites. To begin, we test for the main effect of cues from elected political elites on public support for international cooperation. Using the same strategy as above, we estimate the effect of expressions of support or opposition to a given international agreement by elected political elites relative to the pure control of no knowledge elite or political elite cues while averaging over the other treatment conditions.

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



percentage-point (95% CI: -28,-16.8;  $p < .000$  ) decline in the share of respondents reporting any level of support for the agreement. We take these results as qualified support for **H2a**.

Endorsements from elites have important effects on support for international agreements, but just as in the case of expert cues, the negative treatment has much larger effects than the otherwise identical support treatment. We summarize these results in Figure 5.

### *Are elite cues moderated by co-partisanship?*

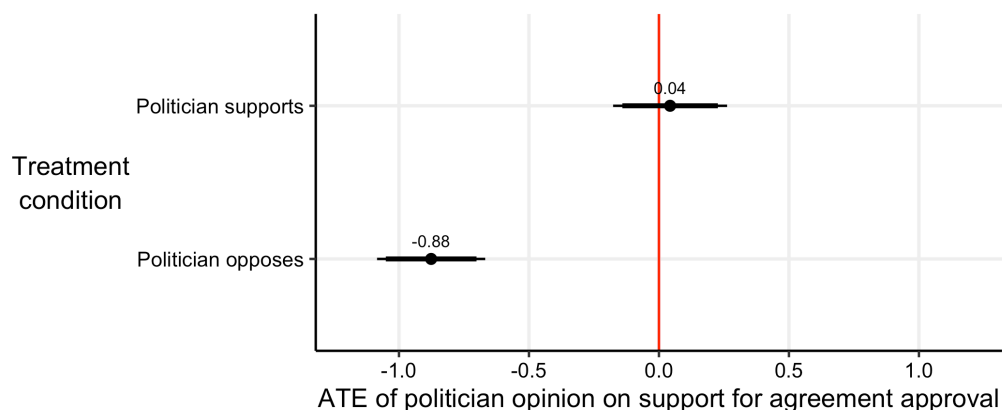
We now examine the effect of co-partisanship. We code whether the support and oppose treatments come from the respondent's political party. Because the effect of co-partisanship may vary by political party, we analyze Democratic and Republican respondents separately. As above, we pool the experiment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

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

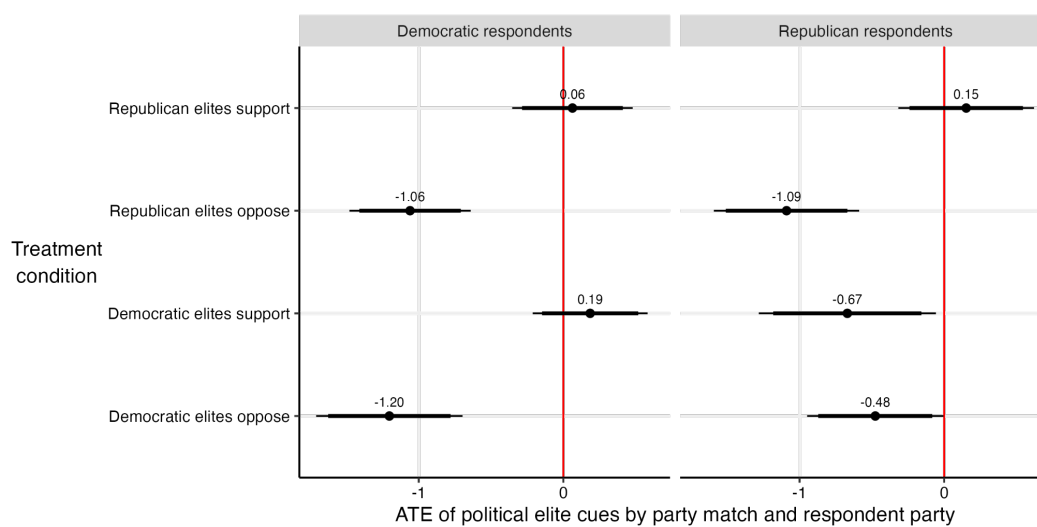
Democratic respondents and 1.1 points (95% CI: -1.6, -.6;  $p < .000$ ) on our 7-point scale among Republican respondents.

The results are somewhat different when we look at cases in which respondents received cues from those outside their party. Among Democratic respondents we found that positive cues from co-partisan political elites had no effect on support for the proposed agreements, and this sub-sample was equally indifferent when the cue came from a Republican political elite. Republican respondents were similarly unmoved by cues of support from members of their own party, but they do appear to rebel against endorsements from Democratic political elites. Compared to the pure control with cues from neither political elites nor knowledge elites, Republican respondents exposed to a positive cue from a Democratic political elite were .67 points (95% CI: -1.28, -.06,  $p = .032$ ) on our 7-point scale less supportive of the agreement. Among Democratic respondents, negative cues from Republican political elites were just about as effective as those from Democratic political elites, lowering support for the proposed agreement by about 1 point (95% CI: -1.5, -.65;  $p < .000$ ). Among Republicans the story is somewhat different: learning that Democratic political elites oppose the agreement lowers support by about .5 points (95% CI: -.95, 0;  $p = .047$ ) on our 7-point scale. Figure 6 summarizes these results.

**Figure 5:** *Effect of cues from political elites*



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



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

cooperative international policies. These results also suggest that Republicans may reactively devalue proposals associated with Democratic political leaders.<sup>9</sup>

### *Expert Cues in Political Context*

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

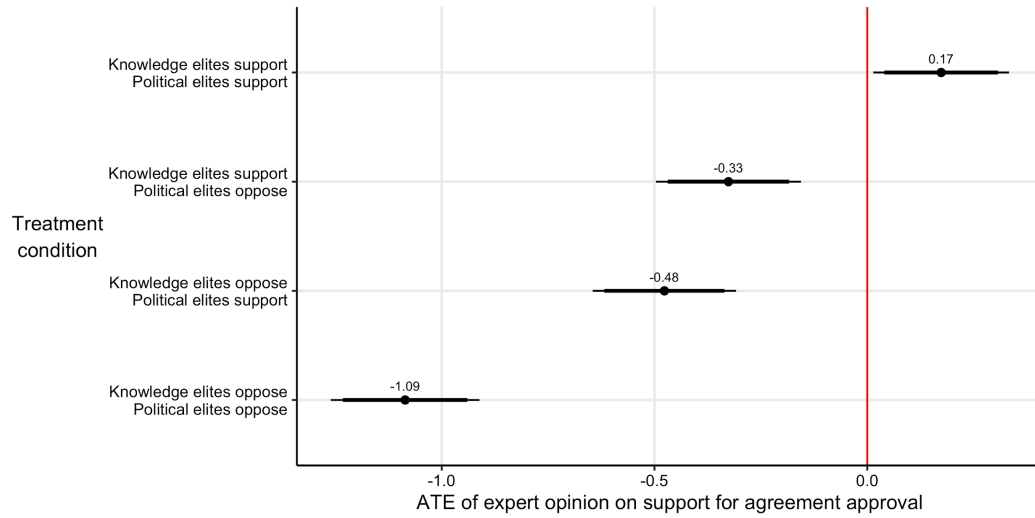
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<sup>9</sup> Brutger (2021) shows that Republican members of the public reactively devalue international agreements when they are proposed by foreign leaders. Here, we identify a similar effect when the proposal is linked to Democrats. As Ross (1995) notes, such proposals are devalued because “the offer comes from an adversary.” Such reactive devaluation may be most common when negative partisanship is high (Abramowitz and Webster 2018).

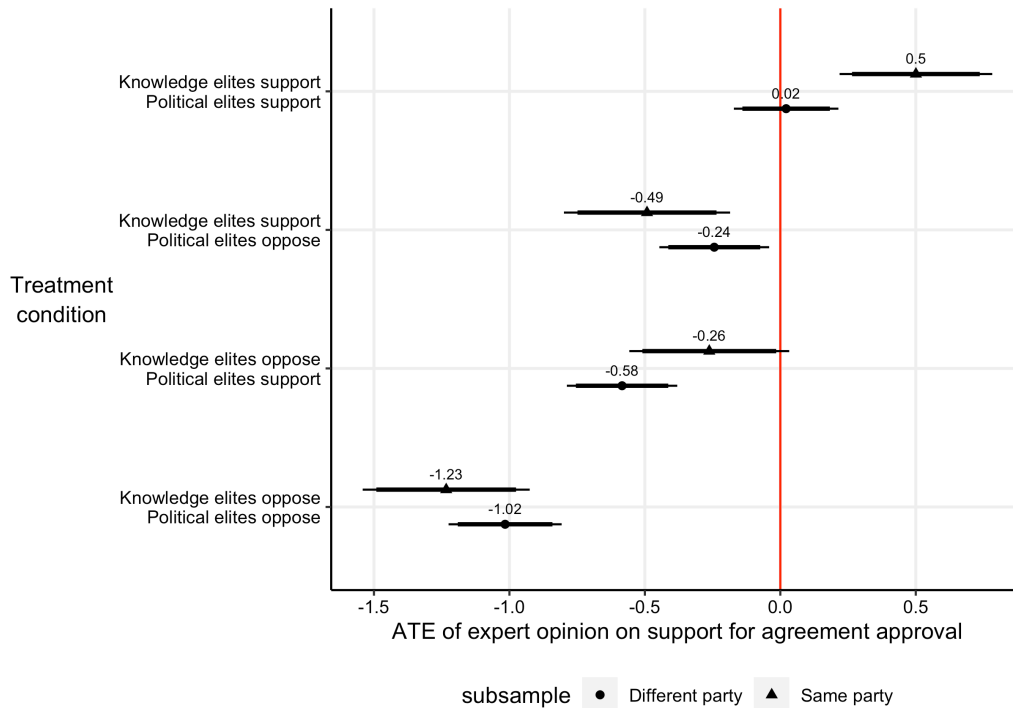
political leader. The difference in relative weight is not substantively large, but considering how powerful past research judges partisan cues to be, the relative importance given to knowledge elites in this context is remarkable. Notably, here too, we identify a strong negativity bias: as soon as any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

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

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



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



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

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

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

## Discussion

Our findings suggest an important role for experts in shaping support for international cooperation. As others (Guisinger and Saunders 2018; Hiscox 2006; Chaudoin 2014; Maliniak, Parajon, and Powers 2020) have previously documented, the public is responsive to cues from policy experts. We build on these past results by showing that expressions of opposition from experts are more powerful cues than endorsements, providing new evidence of a pervasive

negativity bias in the effect of elite cues on public support for proposed policies (Soroka 2014). This is important because it suggests a structural advantage for elites of all stripes wishing to forestall new cooperative endeavors.

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

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

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



our results suggest that Democratic political leaders who propose and support international treaties will be structurally disadvantaged relative to their Republican counterparts. Members of the general public who identify as Republicans react against proposals from Democratic leaders; we found no evidence, however, that Democrats react against proposals endorsed by Republican leaders. Third, the most effective way for a political leader to generate support for new international policies is to find experts with domain-relevant expertise—climate scientists on climate treaties, for example—and get them to endorse the effort. While the effects may be muted in equilibrium for the reasons discussed above, our findings suggest that such an effort would help mitigate the effect of denouncements from other elites.

We have provided evidence that knowledge elites can have important effects on public support for foreign policy proposals, but the actual effect of such cues in the real world may be muted since a wide variety of both relevant and irrelevant cues are constantly competing for the public's attention. It is worth remembering, however, that even if the public pays expert cues little mind in their day-to-day lives, policy practitioners pay likely much closer attention. In addition, the process of seeking public support for and congressional ratification of a treaty is likely to exhibit selection effects in which political leaders avoid proposing treaties that are not informed by policy experts in the first place. As such, the real world often does not generate the relevant counterfactuals for assessing just how important a role knowledge elite endorsements or denouncements play in any given instance; smart leaders will work with knowledge elites before announcing policy, limiting the volume of denouncements, while less savvy leaders or leaders with constituencies predisposed against the views of experts may lock out knowledge elites and so propose policies that are more likely to invite harsh criticism from experts. In such cases, where both the policy and the strength of cues vary endogenously, separating the effect of the

knowledge elite cue from, for example, the effect of the underlying policy is fraught. Finally, political elites often strategically invoke expertise after having proposed a given policy to win support for their preferred policies, making it difficult to distinguish the effects of expert cues from more partisan cues provided by leaders.

This study advances our understanding of the impact of expert cues on public opinion, the interaction of expert and partisan cues, and the relative influence of elite endorsements and denunciations of policy proposals, but it also suggests several avenues for future research. For example, our study explores statements by groups of knowledge elites, or “epistemic communities” (Adler 1992; Haas 1992), but our politician treatment invokes solitary political support rather than a unified front from a political party. Future work should explore the impact of consensus among partisan elites. Second, additional research efforts also might expand our work to explore the impact of different kinds of cues or policy frames, as well as cues from a range of different elites. In addition to knowledge and policy elites, such efforts might examine cues from celebrities—film stars or members of the Royal family, for instance—or religious leaders on public support for international policies. Third, future research should explore other characteristics of citizens, in addition to their political party, that might influence whether members of the public even view knowledge elites as experts. For example, knowledge and education levels, existing policy preferences, and other life experiences all may play a role (Darmofal 2005). Finally, of course, subsequent research efforts might address the domestic process of building support for actual historical and contemporary international agreements, rather than restricting themselves to the use of experiments to study the effect of expert and partisan cues on public support for international cooperation. Previous work (Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014) suggests that the use of real international agreements and expert opinion about

their implications might increase the effect of expert endorsements and or denouncements relative to partisan cues.

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