Political Parties, Motivated Reasoning, and Issue Framing Effects

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Issue framing is one of the most important means of elite influence on public opinion. However, we know almost nothing about how citizens respond to frames in what is possibly the most common situation in politics: when frames are sponsored by political parties. Linking theory on motivated reasoning with framing research, we argue not only that citizens should be more likely to follow a frame if it is promoted by "their" party; we expect such biases to be more pronounced on issues at the center of party conflicts and among the more politically aware. Two experiments embedded in a nationally representative survey support these arguments. Our findings revise current knowledge on framing, parties, and public opinion.

When receiving news about politics, citizens are confronted with elites struggling to define and interpret what the issues of the day are really about in attempts to inform and influence public opinion. For example, elites might present or *frame* a social welfare proposal in terms of fighting poverty or straining on public budgets. Similarly, allowing a hate-group rally could be framed as protecting free speech or risking public order. Given the logic of electoral competition and representation in democracy, political parties and candidates are center stage in public debate and accordingly their attempts to frame issues their way are the driving force of much policy discussion. As Sniderman observes, "[t]o win political power, the parties must compete, and a central aspect of this competition is their effort to define the terms of political choice" (2000, 75).[1]

Nevertheless, we have a surprisingly poor understanding of how public opinion is influenced by such issue frames explicitly sponsored by a political party; what we call *party frames*. This is because extant research is awkwardly divided. On the one hand, a vibrant and rapidly growing literature has demonstrated that elite frames can shape public opinion in powerful ways (for reviews, see Chong and Druckman 2007b; Kinder 2003); yet, this research has neglected the impact of some of the most important sources of issue frames in real-world politics: political parties. On the other hand, studies of political parties have primarily focused on the impact of parties on public opinion over the long haul, not the effects of parties' specific communications; e.g., how transformations in party elites over time have led to mass transformations (Carmines and Wagner 2006), or how party competition increases the attitude consistency across policy domains (Petersen, Slothuus, and Togeby n.d.; Sniderman and Bullock 2004).

Consequently, we still know very little about how citizens actually react towards much of the everyday political discussion wherein political parties develop and promote issue frames in attempts to win public support for their policies. Thus, whereas there is now a widespread understanding of the importance of elite framing to public opinion (Kinder 2003), it has been virtually overlooked what it means that issue frames are often sponsored by political parties or partisan candidates. In other words, we still need to clarify the basic questions of how people respond to issue frames from political parties, and which individual and situational factors determine the kind and strength of effects that party frames might have on opinion formation.

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[1]Schoenbach, de Ridder, and Lauf (2001) found that politicians account for between one-half and two-thirds of all political actors occuring in television news during election campaigns, and these figures also appear to generalize to everyday politics (Binderkrantz 2008).

In this study, we bring together two of the major literatures in political behavior—framing and party identification—to examine for the first time how public opinion is influenced by issue frames explicitly sponsored by political parties. We thus address a serious lack of realism in extant research, and the result is major revisions to our understanding of how both framing and partisanship work. Drawing on the theory of motivated reasoning—a widely accepted psychological account of how people process political information that hitherto has not been employed to understand framing—we propose a set of novel predictions specifying the political conditions under which parties should be especially important to framing effects and among what groups of citizens.

Based on our unique experimental design embedded in a representative national survey, we not only find strong empirical support for the suspicion that the partisan sponsor of a frame conditions framing effects in critical ways. We also show, consistent with our theory, that the structure of party competition across issues matters such that citizens react more strongly towards the party sponsor on a partisan conflict issue than on a partisan consensus issue. Moreover, we find that opinion among the more politically aware is driven more by the partisan source than by substantive frame content, whereas the opposite pattern is evident among the less aware.

These findings are important and revise current knowledge on framing, parties, and public opinion. First, we show that under the more realistic conditions involving both frames and parties, citizens are able to resist and even counterargue frames, based on the partisan source of the frame. These results suggest that citizens are not as susceptible to framing as some previous accounts have worried (e.g., Bartels 2003; Zaller 1992). Second, in contrast to a large literature on party cues, we find that partisan sources, in combination with frames, matter most in situations where citizens are traditionally seen as sufficiently well-equipped to *not* relying on source cues—i.e., when they are politically knowledgeable and the issue is widely debated (see Kam 2005; Mondak 1993).

Political Parties and Framing Effects

Building on prior work, we understand issue framing as a process in which a communicator "defines and constructs a political issue or public controversy" (Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997, 567) by emphasizing "a subset of potentially relevant considerations" (Druckman and Nelson 2003, 730) and

thereby pointing the receiver to "the essence of the issue" (Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 143). A framing effect occurs when such "frames in communication" subsequently affect the "frames in thought" of the receivers, that is, their cognitive understanding of a given situation and/or their opinion (Chong and Druckman 2007b).

Recent studies of issue framing have reaffirmed the potential of alternative frames to sway public opinion, while at the same time have improved the realism of earlier work. Thus, scholars have begun to examine effects of competing frames (Chong and Druckman 2007a; Jerit 2009; Sniderman and Theriault 2004), the interplay of frames and citizens' deliberation with peers (Price, Nie, and Cappella 2005; Druckman and Nelson 2003), and how framing effects evolve over time (Chong and Druckman 2008; Lecheler and de Vreese 2009). A few studies have also addressed how the source of a frame moderates framing effects and found that, e.g., frames have little influence when promoted by a noncredible source (Chong and Druckman 2007a; Druckman 2001a; Hartman and Weber 2009; Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2006).

However, while this current trend of research illuminates framing effects in contexts more representative of many of the real-world environments facing citizens, *none* of this work has taken political parties into account (though see Slothuus n.d.).[2] Given the ubiquity of political parties as sponsors of issue frames in policy debates and political news reporting (e.g., Jerit 2008), we find the absence of parties a serious limitation of current framing research. This limitation is all the more unfortunate because partisan loyalties have been found to be one of the most fundamental ingredients in public opinion (Carsey and Layman 2006; Goren 2005) and hence the party sponsor might likely influence how people judge the frame. Thus, fundamentally, we know little about whether frames have different effects if sponsored by one party rather than another—and in what ways, if any, the party sponsor affects framing effects.

How Parties Matter to Framing Effects

For frames to matter we assume that considerations emphasized in a frame must be available, accessible,

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[2]Druckman (2001b) also includes parties but this study focused on equivalence framing (i.e., presenting information in different, but logically equivalent ways), a kind of framing that is rare in political discourse (Sniderman and Theriault 2004, 135).

and judged to be applicable at the time of forming an opinion (Chong and Druckman 2007a, 639; Price and Tewksbury 1997). First, being available means that a consideration is comprehended by the receiver and stored in memory such that it can subsequently be retrieved and used. Second, the available consideration must be sufficiently accessible in memory to be activated and used when forming an opinion (Higgins 1996). Third, and most important to our argument, a consideration being available and accessible may not be sufficient for it to influence opinion formation; people might critically judge how *applicable* (i.e., relevant), they feel a consideration emphasized in a frame is to their opinion on the issue (Chong and Druckman 2007a, 639–40; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997; Price and Tewksbury 1997, 192–94; Shen and Edwards 2005). As Price and Tewksbury explain,

> " . . . it is important to recognize that social perceivers will evaluate the constructs they have accessible in terms of their suitability for interpreting and responding to their environment. Consequently, they often . . . will either filter out these items they consider inappropriate or they will use them as standards, or contrast points, in their evaluations." (1997, 187–88)

We argue that the partisan source can critically influence whether a consideration emphasized in a frame is deemed applicable and hence potentially used in opinion formation. To understand how party frames work to influence opinion, the theory of "motivated reasoning" provides a helpful approach. Motivated reasoning is a widely accepted psychological account of how people process political information (see Mutz 2007); yet, there appears to be a fundamental disconnect between framing and motivated reasoning in extant research (Druckman, Kuklinski, and Sigelman 2009).

A basic premise in research on motivated reasoning is that people are not merely motivated to form opinions that are accurate, but often also to a large degree strive to defend and maintain their extant values, identities, and attitudes. In politics, citizens will thus tend to be motivated by *directional* more than *accuracy* goals (Chaiken, Liberman, and Eagly 1989, 234–38; Kunda 1990). As such, citizens cannot be expected to seek out and assess information and interpretations, such as those provided by a party frame, with an open mind. Rather, citizens will be driven by their predispositions to reach conclusions in a particular direction and may thus "ignore or devalue contrary information, bias the perception of credibility, or overlook important factors" (Taber, Lodge, and Glathar 2001, 208–209). Taber and Lodge

(2006, 756) suggest that directional goals and selective information processing are driven by affect, automatically elicited by the attitude object or some information about it. Thus, affect and cognition interact in determining how citizens process political information.

Following these insights, we argue that citizens act as "motivated reasoners" when responding to issue frames promoted by political parties. Indeed, the explicit party label might spark a motivated assessment of the frame. Partisanship is a fundamental and enduring political predisposition (Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), more stable than core political values (Goren 2005), that has been demonstrated to shape policy opinions (Carsey and Layman 2006) and perceptions (Bartels 2002; Gaines et al. 2007). Thus, people's feelings towards political parties should be particularly likely to bias how they assess the applicability of party frames. Specifically, if a frame is sponsored by a party people feel attached to, motivated reasoning should lead them to pay closer attention to frame content and assess it more favorably. In contrast, if people have negative feelings towards the party sponsor, they would discount, simply ignore, or even engage in counterarguing the interpretations in the frame (see Lebo and Cassino 2007; Taber and Lodge 2006). Thus, when forming or updating opinions, citizens ought to rely more on considerations emphasized in a party frame if sponsored by "their" party than otherwise. This is our first hypothesis:

> *H1: Citizens should be more inclined to follow a party frame if they feel attached to the party sponsor than if they do not feel attached to the party sponsor.*

The phenomenon that citizens use partisanship to filter political information has been recognized in classic voting studies (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960) as well as in more recent work on party cues (Kam 2005; Mondak 1993; Zaller 1992). However, not only do we extend this mechanism to the domain of framing; our theoretical account based on motivated reasoning also allows us to develop novel predictions about how reactions toward party frames should vary across situations (i.e., between issues) and individuals (i.e., between levels of political awareness). These expectations challenge conventional wisdom on the influence of parties on opinion formation.

First, we expect people to be particularly motivated to judge the applicability of a frame according to its partisan source in situations where the issue is at the center of conflict between political parties. As

Huddy explains, theories of social identity and self-categorization posit that "individuals are more likely to think of themselves as members of social groups under conditions in which the use of a group label maximizes the similarities between oneself and other group members, and heightens one's differences with outsiders" (2001, 134). Such party-based group differences are emphasized precisely when political parties conflict over an issue. Thus, Price argues, "by depicting *which* groups are at odds over a particular issue, media reports can signal which social identities are relevant to the problem;" in this way, political news "may trigger social categorization, inducing people to think of themselves and others in relation to the issue as group members" (1989, 200, 201, emphasis in original).

In other words, on issues at the center of partisan conflict—where partisan values seem to be particularly at stake—citizens' partisan loyalties should be especially salient and hence more likely bias their response to party frames (e.g., Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009, 139). Therefore, people will follow frames from "their" party more carefully, and will tend to dismiss or even counterargue frames from opposing parties (see Lupia and McCubbins 1998, 60–61, 194). Conversely, on party consensus issues—e.g., involving broad consensual values or national interests—motivated reasoners should not per se dismiss or react in contrast to a frame merely because it is put forward by an opposition party, as even an out-party can be perceived as sharing "common interests" (Lupia and McCubbins 1998) if it stands on the same side of an issue as one's own party. Thus, on consensus issues party identification will be less salient to citizens when assessing party frames. This argument is captured in our second hypothesis:

> H2: *Partisanship should bias citizens' opinion in response to party frames to a greater extent on conflict issues than on consensus issues.*

Furthermore, we expect the more politically aware to react more strongly towards the party sponsor of a frame, compared to the less politically aware. While partisanship determines the direction of bias in motivated reasoning, citizens' engagement with politics should influence the strength of bias. Previous research has found engagement with an issue to increase the motivation to engage in selective information processing (Taber, Lodge, and Glathar 2001, 210). Following existing work (Chong and Druckman 2007a, 647; Taber and Lodge 2006, 757, 760), we take general political awareness to capture both citizens' motivation and ability to process party frames. Thus,

political awareness not only determines how much people care about politics and how likely they are to recognize when parties conflict over an issue (motivation); the politically aware also "possess greater ammunition with which to counterargue" (ability) (Taber and Lodge 2006, 757). As Taber, Cann, and Kucsova suggest, "it takes very little sophistication to feel that attitude-congruent arguments are stronger than those that challenge one's priors; the active generation of counter-arguments on the other hand should require more sophistication" (2009, 153).

Based on these arguments, we expect people with greater motivation *and* ability to be more biased when assessing party frames in general, but we expect such persons in particular to be distinguished from their less motivated and capable fellow citizens in reacting more strongly in response to party frames from *opposing* parties because they are better equipped to counter-argue. Thus, at least on conflict issues where partisan values are at stake, politically aware receivers should tend to react *against* party frames—i.e., adopt a position contrary to the one implied in the frame—if it is sponsored by an opposing party. This dynamic is captured in our third hypothesis:

> H3: *On partisan conflict issues, citizens with greater political awareness will tend to react towards a party frame from an opposing party by adopting the position opposite the one advocated in the frame (leading to a contrast effect).*

In sum, we extend the mechanism of partisan bias to understanding how citizens respond to frames explicitly sponsored by political parties. Our expectations that such reactions should be stronger on partisan conflict issues and among the more politically aware are novel and advance current knowledge in several ways. First, we extend traditional models of persuasion that do not expect individuals to counterargue (Lupia and McCubbins 1998, 41–43). For example, Zaller (1992) asserts that politically aware citizens will just ignore messages inconsistent with their predispositions, while our argument raises the possibility that people have the capacity to counterargue and take an opposite position of a frame if they are sufficiently motivated.

Second, our argument advances current discussions of contrast effects in framing research. Thus, Chong and Druckman (2007a) found contrast effects—among politically aware—when individuals compared a strong and a weak frame on each side of an issue, but not in response to varying sources of frames. They suggested that "a contrast effect requires competing rationales that vary sharply in their persuasiveness"

(Chong and Druckman 2007a, 648). We argue, in contrast, that when frames are promoted by such politically engaging sources as political parties, citizens might be motivated to form opinions that contrast with even strong frames.

Third, our hypotheses contradict previous work on party cues. From these studies we would expect that party source cues matter most on distant issues of little concern (Gilens and Murakawa 2002, 21) and that the least politically aware would benefit most from party cues (Kam 2005)—the opposite of what our hypotheses state. Studies of party cues have generally focused on how party cues can help citizens overcome their limited issue-relevant knowledge and nevertheless form opinions. Based on theory of motivated reasoning, we argue that parties should matter to framing, not because people are ignorant of politics, but because they care. Or, more precisely, partisan sources should be particularly important to framing effects *when* people care—as they are likely to do when parties conflict over an issue or when they are politically aware.

Experimental Design

In order to test our hypotheses, we implemented two experiments covering a partisan conflict (welfare policy) and consensus (trade policy) issue. In each experiment, embedded in an online survey, participants read a constructed newspaper article about a policy proposal and subsequently reported their opinion on the proposed policy. Because we are interested in testing whether the effects of different frames vary depending on the party sponsor, we constructed four conditions in each experiment: a pro frame and a con frame (see Chong and Druckman 2007a) sponsored by one of two political parties.[3] This design enabled us to measure the effect of party sponsor by comparing the opinions among participants exposed to the same frame but with different party sponsors. We also measured the effects of frame content by comparing between the opinions of participants exposed to different frames sponsored by the same party.

Parties and Issues

Denmark, a Western European proportional-representation parliamentary system, formed the

context of our study. We focus on the two major parties as party sponsors in both experiments: the Social Democrats and the Liberals (*Venstre*). Even though Denmark is a multiparty system with seven or eight parties usually represented in parliament, these two parties each normally garner between one-third and one-fifth of the popular vote, and they are traditionally among the leading parties in government coalitions (Green-Pedersen and Thomsen 2005).

The conflict issue experiment focused on welfare, the major partisan conflict issue in contemporary Danish politics. The competition between most parties, and the Social Democrats and Liberals in particular, centers around which party can most persuasively provide the most public welfare, e.g., health care, childcare, and care for the elderly, as opposed to whether public welfare ought to be expanded. Thus, while the policy distances between the major parties have narrowed, the conflict between parties has intensified. Care for the elderly has therefore come to form a major issue in recent election campaigns (Andersen 2006). In this study, we focus on a particular partisan conflict over the means through which in-home care for senior citizens ought to be provided: should in-home care be provided by caretakers in the public sector or be contracted out to private firms?

Experimentation with party framing involves a delicate balance between making experimental variation in party positions to gain control while also maintaining experimental realism. Contracting out in-home care for seniors appears to be a suitable case for our purposes, as the issue has been at the center of party conflict for more than a decade (Togeby 2004, 114–15, 124–25), yet the two major parties have tended to take rather ambiguous positions on the issue. Thus, the Social Democrats are officially against contracting out most welfare services despite large parts of the party having argued in favor of it (Green-Pedersen 2002, 283). Conversely, the Liberals are officially in favor of contracting out but have adjusted their policy to endorse expanding public welfare and increasing the number of public employees (Andersen 2006). Contracting out in-home care is therefore clearly a partisan conflict issue, while it should be possible to realistically vary party positions in the stimulus articles.

In the partisan consensus experiment, we focused on whether Denmark should join a proposed trade agreement between the World Trade Organization (WTO) and China. International trade is a low-salient issue in Danish politics and also calls for consensus between most political parties, including the Social Democrats and the Liberals. Including both a conflict

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[3]For other purposes, the design also included three nonpartisan conditions not analysed here.

and a consensus issue in the study allows us to illuminate possible different dynamics of party framing across the two kinds of issues.

Participants

The experiments were embedded in a survey conducted online by the Zapera polling company. The sample (N = 925) was approximately representative of the Danish adult population.[4] The survey was fielded November 20 through December 4, 2006 with a response rate of 61% (AAPOR RR1; see www.aapor.org).

Stimulus Material

We constructed news articles to vary party sponsors while keeping frame content and factual information constant (Social Democratic versus Liberal conditions) and to vary the framing of the issue while keeping other content identical (pro versus con frame conditions). The articles mimicked day-to-day news reporting common in Danish newspapers, and while quotations and policy proposals were fictitious, the articles mirrored actual ongoing discussions at the time of the study. Thus, we presented our diverse group of participants with meaningful issues and avoided presenting "emaciated" frames (Kinder 2007, 158).

In the conflict issue experiment, the pro frame emphasized the positive consequences of contracting out, while the con frame emphasized the negative consequences. Similarly, the pro frame in the consensus issue experiment emphasized the positive consequences for Denmark in joining the trade agreement between the WTO and China, while the con frame emphasized the negative consequences. In both experiments, a core of the articles containing factual information and the context of the issue remained constant between the pro and con frames. The valence of the frames was confirmed in a pretest.[5]

Measures

As our dependent opinion variable, we measured (on a 7-point scale) support for the two policy proposals

covered by the respective news articles. In the conflict issue experiment, we asked participants to indicate their support for contracting out in-home care to senior citizens. In the consensus issue experiment, we measured support for Denmark joining the WTO trade agreement with China. The variables were recoded to range from 0 through 1, with higher values indicating greater support; "don't know" answers were excluded from analyses.[6]

Besides varying frame content and party sponsors, our hypotheses involve two individual-level factors: party attachment and political awareness. We measured participants' party attachment by simply enquiring who they would vote for.[7] Voting preference is clearly a weaker measure of party affiliation than party identification, but the implication is likely that we will find weaker effects of party affiliation and are thus obtaining conservative estimates of partisan bias (e.g., Gaines et al. 2007). Because we focus on differential reactions to party frames from supporters of the two parties in our stimulus material, we limit our analyses to those who would vote for the Social Democrats (27.8 %, N = 257, coded 0) or the Liberals (20.2 %, N = 187, coded 1).[8] We measured political awareness using four factual knowledge questions (Zaller 1992). Due to our focus on party politics, our questions specifically related to political parties. These items were summed to an index scored from 0 through 1 (α = .68; M = .55, SD = .35) and dichotomized by its median: .50 (less aware = 51.5%, coded 0; more aware coded 1).[9]

Results

We begin by noting that the opposite (pro or con) frames push opinion in opposing directions on both

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[4]The sample matched population data on gender and region. On age, the sample was fairly representative, though it contained too few younger (18–20 years) and older (65+ years) individuals, whereas the middle-aged (51–55 years) respondents were slightly overrepresented. Moreover, among our participants more had completed further education and fewer had completed only basic school education. Details available from the authors.

[5]See the online appendix (at either http://journals.cambridge.org/jop or www.ps.au.dk/en/slothuus) for details and full-length articles.

[6]On the conflict issue, 5% answered "don't know"; on the consensus issue, 21%. Including these respondents in the analysis does not change results.

[7]To avoid the experimental stimulus to influence the measure of partisanship and hence raise problems of endogenerity, this question was asked before the experimental treatment.

[8]Other partisan groups contain too few cases to permit meaningful analyses.

[9]Question wordings are in the online appendix. We feel confident that our measure of political awareness is not merely an indicator of strength of partisanship. Thus, in the 2005 Danish National Election Study, less politically aware Social Democratic voters were just as likely to report they identified with the party as more aware were. Among Liberal voters, nearly as many of the less aware than the more aware identified with the party (details are in the online appendix).

the conflict issue (welfare policy) and the consensus issue (trade policy).[10] Thus, on welfare, opinion is more supportive of contracting out in-home care in the pro-frame (M = .54) than in the con-frame (M = .45) condition (p < .05). Likewise, there is more support for the trade agreement among participants exposed to a pro frame compared to those exposed to a con frame (M_{pro} = .75 vs. M_{con} = .55, p < .01).[11] Thus, our framing manipulations influence opinion and we hence replicate the general finding from previous framing studies (Chong and Druckman 2007b), even when the frames are explicitly promoted by parties. According to our theory, however, the framing effects will be much more differentiated when considering the separate combinations of frame, party sponsor, and receiver party preference.

The Impact of Parties on Framing Effects

Hypothesis 1 predicts that citizens should generally be more inclined to follow a frame promoted by a party if they feel attached to the party sponsor. Therefore, across both issues studied here, we expect that among Social Democratic voters, frames sponsored by the Social Democrats will have a greater influence on opinion than frames sponsored by the Liberals. Conversely, among Liberal voters we expect frames sponsored by the Liberals to have a greater impact than frames sponsored by the Social Democrats. Thus, the size of framing effects should be contingent upon a match between the partisan source of the frame and receiver partisanship.

We test this by first specifying models where we regress opinion on dummy variables indicating the direction of the frame (pro or con) participants were exposed to, the party sponsor of the frame (Social Democrats or Liberals), and participants' party preference (Social Democrats or Liberals) as well as the full set of interactions between these variables (see Druckman and Nelson 2003; Hartman and Weber 2009). As the results in Table 1 reveal, we find a three-way frame × party sponsor × party preference

interaction on both issues. Specifically, on the conflict issue the three-way interaction coefficient is b = .35 (s.e. = .14, p = .01) and on the consensus issue the three-way interaction coefficient is b = .29 (s.e. = .11, p < .05).[12] These results indicate that issue frames do indeed vary in influence based upon both the party of the receiver and the sponsor. However, the three-way interactions provide only a partial test of our first hypothesis.[13] To clarify whether, as Hypothesis 1 predicts, frames are more influential if there is a match between the party of the sponsor and receiver, we next conduct a series of simple effects tests comparing the magnitude of framing separately for Social Democratic and Liberal voters.

Focusing first on the conflict issue (see upper half of Figure 1), opinion among Social Democratic voters (panel A) tended to be more affected when the frames were promoted by "their" party than when the same frames were sponsored by the Liberals. Thus, the difference in support for contracting out among Social Democratic voters is 21% points between pro and con frames if the source is Social Democratic (M_{pro} = .50 vs. M_{con} = .29, p < .01), twice as large as when the frame is sponsored by the Liberal party (M_{pro} = .37 vs. M_{con} = .28, n.s.). To test whether this difference in framing effects between party sponsors is statistically significant, we regress opinion on frame, party sponsor, and frame × party sponsor. We find the two-way frame × party sponsor interaction does not reach statistical significance (b = −.12, s.e. = .10, p = .21).

Conversely, among Liberal voters (panel B), framing effects are greater if the Liberal party promotes the frames (M_{pro} = .74 vs. M_{con} = .56, p = .01) than if the Social Democratic party does. In fact, there is a tendency (though not statistically significant) to a contrast effect among Liberals if the party sponsor is Social Democratic (M_{pro} = .64 vs. M_{con} = .69, n.s.). In short, frames exert a greater influence on opinion when the partisan source matches participants' partisanship. This difference in framing effects is corroborated by a significant two-way frame × party sponsor interaction (b = .23, s.e. = .10, p < .05), consistent with our first hypothesis. In sum, on the conflict issue the size of framing effects differ

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[10]Comparisons across experimental groups on socio-demographic variables (gender, age, region, education, income) indicate successful randomization; thus, differences in opinion between groups can be attributed to the experimental stimuli (within statistical limits). All results reported are robust if we include sociodemographic variables as controls in the models.

[11]These means refer to participants with a Social Democratic or Liberal party preference because we focus our analyses on these individuals. Corresponding means among all participants regardless of partisanship are M_{pro} = .50 vs. M_{con} = .45 (p < .05) on the conflict issue and M_{pro} = .71 vs. M_{con} = .55 (p < .01) on the consensus issue. All significance tests reported are two-tailed.

[12]All results, in both experiments, are robust if we used ordered probit models instead of OLS regression (see the online appendix); for ease of interpretation we prefer to report the latter.

[13]The three-way frame × party sponsor × party preference interaction suggests that the two-way interactions between frame and party sponsor or party preference, respectively, differ with the levels of the third variable, but the three-way interaction cannot, by itself, tell the nature of these contingencies.

TABLE 1 Effects of Party Sponsor, Frame Content, and Receiver Party Preference on Policy Support

	Conflict Issue Experiment	Consensus Issue Experiment
Constant	.29 (.05)***	.48 (.04)***
Liberal Party Sponsor	−.01 (.07)	.10 (.06)*
Pro Frame	.21 (.07)***	.24 (.05)***
Liberal Party Preference	.40 (.07)***	.13 (.06)**
Liberal Party Sponsor × Pro Frame	−.12 (.09)	−.14 (.08)*
Liberal Party Sponsor × Liberal Party Preference	−.12 (.10)	−.18 (.08)**
Pro Frame × Liberal Party Preference	−.26 (.10)***	−.09 (.08)
Liberal Party Sponsor × Pro Frame × Liberal Party Preference	.35 (.14)***	.29 (.11)**
Adjusted R^2	18.9%	14.0%
N	379	356

Note: Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variable: Support for contracting out in-home care (conflict issue) or trade agreement (consensus issue). All independent variables are dichotomized.
*p < .10, **p < .05, ***p ≤ .01 (two-tailed).

significantly across party sponsors among Liberal voters, but not among Social Democratic voters, lending partial support to Hypothesis 1.

Turning to the consensus issue experiment, we find similar results to those on the conflict issue, but the support for our hypothesis that people will be more inclined to follow frames if sponsored by "their" party is more consistent. Thus, as shown in the lower half of Figure 1, among Social Democratic voters (panel C) difference in opinion is more than twice as large if the opposing frames are sponsored by the Social Democrats (M_{pro} = .72 vs. M_{con} = .48, p < .01) than by the Liberals (M_{pro} = .68 vs. M_{con} = .58, p < .10). Likewise, among Liberal voters (panel D) frames are twice as influential if sponsored by the Liberals (M_{pro} = .83 vs. M_{con} = .53, p < .01) than by the Social Democrats (M_{pro} = .76 vs. M_{con} = .61, p < .05). These differences in framing effects are corroborated by a significant two-way frame × party sponsor interaction among Liberal voters (b = .15, s.e. = .08, p < .10) and in this experiment among the Social Democratic voters as well (b = −.14, s.e. = .08, p < .10).

These results on the consensus issue provide strong support for Hypothesis 1. Furthermore, it is important to note that on this issue, in contrast to the conflict issue, citizens seemed to be persuaded even by frames sponsored by the opposing party (i.e., they did not dismiss the frames). These results provide evidence that even if people see some merit in frames sponsored by other parties, they are *more* likely to be affected by frames if they are promoted by their own party.

In sum, overall our findings support Hypothesis 1 that people are more inclined to follow a frame if it

is sponsored by their own party, with the exception of Social Democratic voters on the conflict issue. These results suggest that citizens act as motivated reasoners when responding to party frames. Thus, when judging applicability of frames explicitly sponsored by a partisan source, people tend to use their partisanship as a filter biasing their assessment of the frame.[14] However, our theory also suggests *when* such partisan biases should be more pronounced and *among whom*. We next assess these conditions empirically; as part of the analysis we will also clarify why our first hypothesis was only partly supported among the Social Democratic voters.
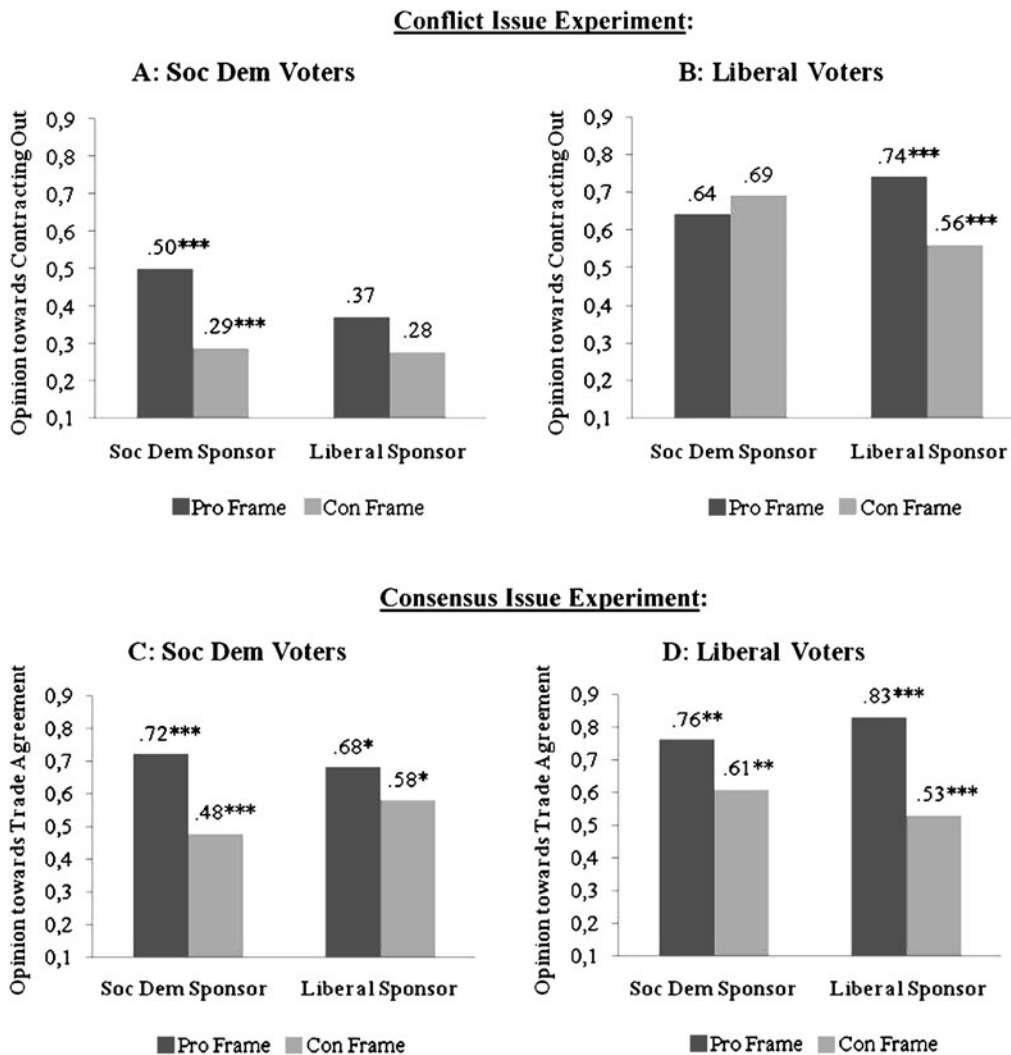
Party Conflict and Political Awareness

We expect citizens to be particularly motivated to use their partisanship in assessing party frames on issues where political parties are in conflict. In contrast to political consensus, party conflict signals that partisan values are at stake and emphasizes differences between parties. In such conflict situations, citizens' partisanship should to be more salient to them and hence more likely be used in judging the applicability of framings of the issue. Accordingly, Hypothesis 2 expects that partisanship will bias citizens' responses to party frames to a greater extent on conflict issues than on consensus issues.

Two findings across our experiments provide support for Hypothesis 2. First, as already noted,

[14]We replicated all findings with another measure of party attachment, the probability of voting for either party in the future, thus lending robustness to our results (see online appendix).

FIGURE 1   Effects of Party Frames on Opinion by Party Preference

Conflict Issue Experiment:

A: Soc Dem Voters

B: Liberal Voters

Consensus Issue Experiment:

C: Soc Dem Voters

D: Liberal Voters

Note: Entries are opinion means on a scale coded 0-1, with higher values indicating greater support for contracting out (conflict issue) or trade agreement (consensus issue). Significance tests refer to comparisions of opinion between pro frame and con frame conditions.
* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p \leq .01$ (two-tailed).

the overall framing effect (regardless of partisan source) was twice as large on the consensus issue—difference in opinion was .21 on the 0–1 scale—than on the conflict issue (.09). Second, the party sponsors mattered more on the conflict issue than on the consensus issue. Specifically, on the consensus issue the frames were able to move opinion even if they were sponsored by an out-party (see panels C and D in Figure 1) whereas frames promoted by opposing parties did not influence opinion significantly on the conflict issue (see panels A and B in Figure 1). In other words, frame content mattered more on the consensus issue than on the conflict issue, whereas partisan sources mattered more on the conflict issue

than on the consensus issue. These results are exactly what we should expect to find given Hypothesis 2.

However, our strongest evidence that the distinction between conflict and consensus issues is essential to understanding party framing comes from analyzing how the more politically aware participants responded to party frames. We expect more politically aware citizens to be distinguished from less politically aware by being both more motivated and better able to assess frames critically and to possibly counterargue them. The motivation to dismiss or counterargue frames from opposing parties should be particularly pronounced when the parties are in conflict and hence signal that partisanship matters.

Hypothesis 3 captures this dynamic by expecting that on conflict issues, but not on consensus issues, the more politically aware will tend to form opinions in contrast to the frame promoted by an opposing party.

As a first step in testing whether the nature and magnitude of framing effects vary this way, we extend the regression models from Table 1 by including a dummy variable for less/more politically aware and all interactions between political awareness and the other variables. According to Hypothesis 3, the magnitude of framing effects on a conflict issue should depend not only on a match between the party of the sponsor and the receiver, but also on individuals' level of political awareness. The results in Table 2 reveal a significant four-way frame × party sponsor × party preference × awareness interaction on the conflict issue (b = .49, s.e. = .28, p < .10), indicating that how citizens react towards party frames on this issue indeed depends on their party preference, the party sponsor as well as their level of political awareness.

To clarify whether the more politically aware care more about which party promotes a frame than the less aware do, as Hypothesis 3 predicts, we next reestimate the model from Table 1 separately for less and more aware participants. These results appear in the second and third columns of Table 2 and show a substantial and significant three-way frame × party sponsor × party preference interaction among the more aware (b = .59, s.e. = .18, p < .01) and a limited and non-significant three-way frame × party

TABLE 2 Effects of Party Sponsor, Frame Content, and Receiver Party Preference, and Political Awareness on Policy Support

	Conflict Issue Experiment			Consensus Issue Experiment		
	All	Less Aware	More Aware	All	Less Aware	More Aware
Constant	.35 (.07)***	.35 (.07)***	.21 (.07)***	.50 (.06)***	.50 (.07)***	.46 (.05)***
Liberal Party Sponsor	−.02 (.10)	−.02 (.11)	.05 (.09)	.04 (.09)	.04 (.09)	.14 (.07)*
Pro Frame	.17 (.09)*	.17 (.09)*	.25 (.10)**	.20 (.08)**	.20 (.08)**	.27 (.07)***
Liberal Party Preference	.24 (.10)**	.24 (.11)**	.59 (.10)***	−.01 (.08)	−.01 (.09)	.25 (.07)***
Liberal Party Sponsor × Pro Frame	.05 (.13)	.05 (.14)	−.26 (.13)**	−.11 (.12)	−.11 (.12)	−.17 (.10)*
Liberal Party Sponsor × Liberal Party Pref.	−.04 (.15)	−.04 (.16)	−.27 (.13)**	−.10 (.12)	−.10 (.12)	−.22 (.11)**
Pro Frame × Liberal Party Preference	−.12 (.13)	−.12 (.14)	−.41 (.14)***	.03 (.12)	.03 (.12)	−.17 (.11)
Liberal Party Sponsor × Pro Frame × Liberal Party Pref.	.10 (.20)	.10 (.21)	.59 (.18)***	.24 (.17)	.24 (.17)	.29 (.15)*
More Aware	−.14 (.10)			−.04 (.08)		
Liberal Party Sponsor × More Aware	.07 (.14)			.10 (.11)		
Pro Frame × More Aware	.09 (.14)			.07 (.11)		
Liberal Party Pref. × More Aware	.35 (.15)**			.26 (.11)**		
Liberal Party Sponsor × Pro Frame × More Aware	−.31 (.19)			−.06 (.15)		
Liberal Party Sponsor × Liberal Party Pref. × More Aware	−.22 (.20)			−.12 (.16)		
Pro Frame × Liberal Party Pref. × More Aware	−.29 (.20)			−.20 (.16)		
Liberal Party Sponsor × Pro Frame × Liberal Party Pref. × More Aware	.49 (.28)*			.04 (.23)		
Adjusted R²	21.4%	7.2%	34.7%	16.1%	14.8%	14.2%
N	379	186	193	356	163	193

Note: Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variable: Support for contracting out in-home care (conflict issue) or trade agreement (consensus issue). All independent variables are dichotomized.
*p < .10, **p < .05, ***p < .01 (two-tailed).

sponsor × party preference interaction among the less aware (b = .10, s.e. = .21, n.s.). These findings suggest that, on the conflict issue, the more politically aware citizens react more strongly toward the party sponsor than the less aware do.

A series of direct effects comparisons substantiate this initial support for Hypothesis 3. Figure 2 illustrates the substantial meaning of the above interaction effects by presenting differences in opinion separately by receiver party preference and political awareness. Looking first at the Social Democratic voters (panel A), it is clear that both less and more aware individuals react in the same manner towards frames promoted by their own party and tend to follow the frame (less aware: M_{pro} = .51 vs. M_{con} = .35, p < .10; more aware: M_{pro} = .46 vs. M_{con} = .21, p < .05). However, if the frames are sponsored by the Liberals (panel B),

more aware Social Democrats dismiss the frame (M_{pro} = .25 vs. M_{con} = .25, n.s.), while less aware Social Democrats follow the frame to about the same extent as when it was sponsored by their own party (M_{pro} = .54 vs. M_{con} = .32, p < .10). Thus, as expected, more aware Social Democrats clearly filter the Liberal frame out; though we do not see a contrast effect. Conversely, less aware Social Democrats do not appear to discriminate between party sponsors (and Hypothesis 1 is, thus, not supported in this group).

Turning to the responses from Liberal voters, we first observe that the more and lesser politically aware Liberals respond nearly uniformly towards frames sponsored by the Liberal party (panel C). In both groups, there is a strong and significant framing effect (less aware: M_{pro} = .72 vs. M_{con} = .52, p < .10; more aware: M_{pro} = .75 vs. M_{con} = .58, p < .10). When

FIGURE 2   Conflict Issue Experiment: Effect of Party Frames on Opinion by Party Preference and Political Awareness
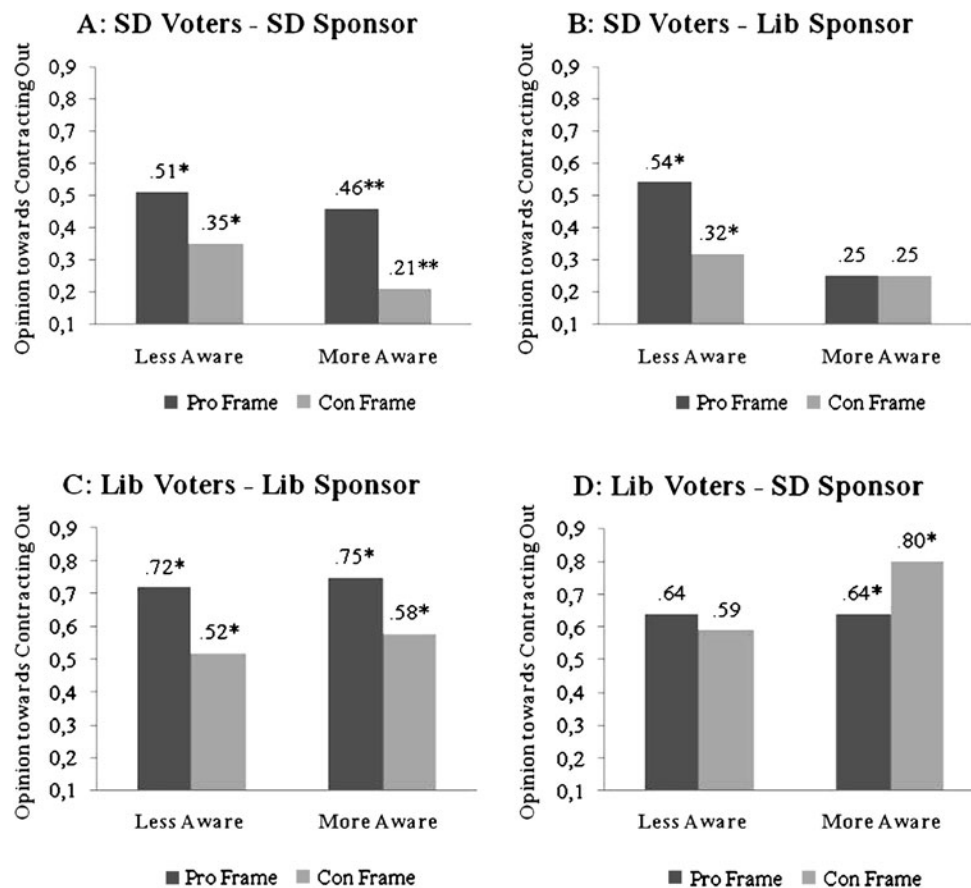
Note: Entries are opinion means on a scale coded 0-1, with higher values indicating greater support for contracting out. Political awareness was measured by an index, dichotomized by its median into Less Aware and More Aware. Significance tests refer to comparisons of opinion between pro frame and con frame conditions.
* p < .10, ** p < .05, *** p < .01 (two-tailed).

the Social Democrats sponsor the frame, however, a dramatically different image emerges (panel D). While the less aware Liberal voters to some limited extent tend to follow the frame even if it is presented by the Social Democrats (M_{pro} = .64 vs. M_{con} = .59, n.s.), there is a substantial contrast effect among aware Liberal voters: if the Social Democrats frame the issue by emphasizing the disadvantages from contracting out, Liberal voters become even more supportive of contracting out (M_{pro} = .64 vs. M_{con} = .80, p < .10).

These results lend strong support to Hypothesis 3: While citizens, regardless of their level of political awareness, tend to follow frames sponsored by a party they support, political awareness appears to be a strong moderator of citizens' responses towards frames sponsored by an opposing party on this conflict issue. Thus, the more aware were able to dismiss and in some cases counterargue frames from opposing parties (i.e., taking the opposite position than advocated by the frame). In contrast, the less aware tended to follow even frames sponsored by the opposing party, especially Social Democratic voters.[15] Significant two-way frame × party sponsor interactions among more aware Social Democratic and Liberal voters, but not among the less aware of these voters, corroborate this conclusion.

Turning to the consensus issue, Hypothesis 3 predicts that citizens' level of political awareness will not condition how they respond to party frames because the more aware should not be particularly motivated to dismiss or counterargue frames from the opposing party. Again, we test this by regressing opinion on frame, party sponsor, receiver partisanship, and political awareness along with all interactions among these variables. As shown in Table 2, we find a nonsignificant four-way frame × party sponsor × party preference × awareness interaction, indicating that responses towards party frames on the consensus issue is not moderated by political awareness. Consistent with this finding, the three-way frame × party sponsor × party preference interactions among less and more aware, respectively (see columns 5 and 6 in Table 2), are essentially of the same magnitude (less aware: b = .24, s.e. = .17, p = .15; more aware: b = .29, s.e. = .15, p < .10) and very similar to the overall three-way interaction in

Table 1. These results clearly support Hypothesis 3 predicting no difference in framing effects across levels of awareness on the consensus issue.

To illustrate these similar response patterns among citizens of greater and lesser political awareness, Figure 3 displays mean opinions across groups. Among Social Democratic voters, regardless of the level of political awareness, frames sponsored by the Social Democrats (panel A) result in strong framing effects (less aware: M_{pro} = .70 vs. M_{con} = .50, p = .01; more aware: M_{pro} = .73 vs. M_{con} = .46, p < .01). Even though frames promoted by the Liberals have a smaller impact on opinion (panel B), responses again are quite similar among less and more aware Social Democrats (less aware: M_{pro} = .64 vs. M_{con} = .54, n.s.; more aware: M_{pro} = .71 vs. M_{con} = .60, n.s.).

A similar picture emerges among Liberal voters, though the more aware receivers are somewhat more reluctant to follow the frames if sponsored by the Social Democrats (panel D; less aware: M_{pro} = .72 vs. M_{con} = .49, p < .05; more aware: M_{pro} = .81 vs. M_{con} = .71, n.s.) than if sponsored by the Liberals (panel C; less aware: M_{pro} = .80 vs. M_{con} = .44, p < .01; more aware: M_{pro} = .85 vs. M_{con} = .63, p < .01). In sum, these findings support Hypothesis 3: On an issue marked by consensus between parties, people appear to feel less reason to discriminate sharply between party sponsors and are even less inclined to react against the out-party frame.[16]

In sum, while participants across both issues were more influenced by frames promoted by their own party, this partisan bias was more pronounced on the conflict issue than on the consensus issue, thus supporting Hypothesis 2. As expected from Hypothesis 3, however, on the conflict issue this partisan bias was dramatically more pronounced among the more politically aware. Thus, aware Social Democratic voters simply dismissed the frames if promoted by the Liberals, and among aware Liberal voters there was even a contrast effect where they moved their opinion away from a frame sponsored by the Social Democrats. The significant role of political awareness in motivating and enabling citizens to assess frames critically was further emphasized by the finding on the conflict issue that less aware Social Democratic voters were just as likely to follow frames promoted by the Liberals as frames from the Social Democrats.

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[15]Results are robust to different codings of political awareness. For example, the most politically aware quartile (answered all four knowledge questions correctly) reacted even more selectively to frames sponsored by an opposing party than those with a moderate level of awareness; among Liberal voters, this implies that the contrast effect was even greater among the most aware.

[16]Again, results are robust to different codings of political awareness. Indeed, the most aware quartile appear to distinguish even less between party sponsors on this consensus issue than do other groups, which further supports our argument about the different logic across types of issues.

FIGURE 3 Consensus Issue Experiment: Effects of Party Frames on Opinion by Party Preference and Political Awareness
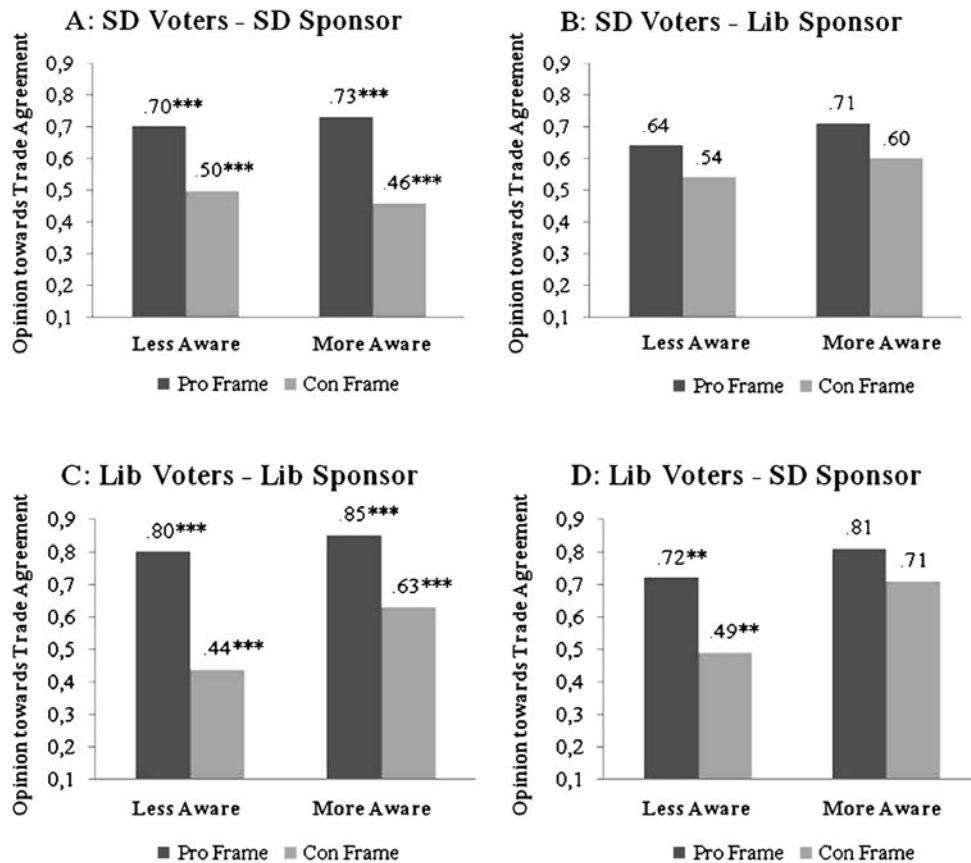
Note: Entries are opinion means on a scale coded 0-1, with higher values indicating greater support for trade agreement. Political awareness was measured by an index, dichotomized by its median into Less Aware and More Aware. Significance tests refer to comparisons of opinion between pro frame and con frame conditions.
* p < .10, ** p < .05, *** p ≤ .01 (two-tailed).

Discussion

In this paper, we have brought together two of the major literatures in political behavior—framing and party identification—to examine how public opinion is affected by "framing battles" in policy debate, where political parties typically are at the center of the struggles to define and construct what is at stake. We know from existing research that how issues are framed often influence public opinion (Chong and Druckman 2007b), and we know that political parties are among the most powerful forces structuring opinion formation (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Carsey and Layman 2006). Yet, no prior study has illuminated how public opinion is influenced by issue frames explicitly sponsored by political parties.

Our results suggest it is long overdue for framing research to begin taking into account that real-world issue frames are typically promoted by affectively charged political groups; and prominent among them are political parties. We found that citizens tend to respond more favorably to an issue frame if sponsored by a party they vote for than if the frame was promoted by another party. This is in itself an important result, as it underlines the importance of considering political parties in framing effects research. Drawing on the theory of motivated reasoning, however, our arguments furthermore specified—and our experiments supported—that this partisan bias in citizens' response towards party frames should be more pronounced on issues at the center of party conflict, not on consensus issues; and the more politically aware should be more sensitive to the partisan source of the frame—relative to the actual content of frames—than the less politically aware.

These results revise conventional wisdom on framing, parties, and public opinion. Our findings corroborate studies that have found source credibility to matter to framing effects (Druckman 2001a; Hartman and Weber 2009), but at the same time previous studies have not found the source to elicit contrast effects (see Chong and Druckman 2007a; Zaller 1992). Moreover, from existing research on party cues we would have expected the least politically aware to make the greatest use of partisan cues on the least engaging issue (Kam 2005; Mondak 1993), but we found the opposite: the partisan source mattered more among the more politically aware and in a situation where the issue was nothing but peripheral.

We believe processes of motivated reasoning (Taber and Lodge 2006) can explain why citizens responded more strongly towards political parties—because citizens are engaged in politics, not because they are ignorant of it. Hence, parties appear to function as much more than merely facilitating cognitive efficiency—parties are important landmarks in the political landscape that citizens relate to (see Cohen 2003; Sniderman 2000). Therefore, we would probably have found even stronger framing effects as well as contrast effects had we been able to distinguish strong party identifiers in our data. Thus, we supported our hypotheses in analyses with a quite mild indicator of partisanship—party preference or vote likelihood—compared to party identification (see Campbell et al. 1960; Carsey and Layman 2006). Hence, partisan biases might be even more pronounced than illuminated in this study.

However, an important caveat is in order. While our participants, quite sensitively, only reacted strongly against frames from the opposing party when they had reason to do so—i.e., on the conflict issue where parties have signalled that partisan values are at stake (similar to the "observer effect" identified by Lupia and McCubbins 1998)—the two issues in our study might differ on other dimensions than the degree of party conflict. In fact, in a pretest involving 202 participants, who did not participate in the main survey but were drawn from the same Internet panel as the main study participants, the elderly care issue was perceived as more personally important than the trade issue. On a 7-point importance rating scale coded 0–1, the mean for elderly care was thus .79 versus .61 for international trade (paired-samples difference of means test: $t_{199} = 8.713$, p $<$ .001). Thus, we cannot rule out that difference in importance or salience drives the distinct responses across the two issues. In addition, we were not able to test formerly the statistical significance of the differences in responses across the two issues (i.e., estimating five-way interactions by adding issue type to the four-way interactions in Table 2).

Nevertheless, we believe the driving force is partisan conflict—this is what makes issues salient in the news and hence among the public, and a clear partisan divide is what according to Carmines and Stimson (1980) over time will make the issue "easy." Moreover, Carsey and Layman (2006) show that people rather change their opinions than party affiliations, except on personally important issues. Accordingly, if personal issue importance was at stake in our case, people should have been *less* responsive to parties on the personally involving welfare issue compared to the less personally involving trade issue. But we found the exact opposite result, and we take this as indication that party conflict is really what made the difference. This interpretation is furthermore consistent with what we predicted from social identity theory.

Finally, the apparent importance of political parties to framing effects uncovered in this study raises some methodological challenges. As we discussed, the real-world positions and reputations of parties and degree of issue conflict between parties places limits on the possibilities available to researchers to credibly vary party positions in experiments. Powerful designs to study the effects of party frames in varying political contexts may therefore well benefit from employing similar experimental designs across contexts (e.g., cross-national or in different party systems) providing natural variation in issue saliency, partisan conflict structure, and levels of party identification, or across time.

Such studies will help identify the constraints and possibilities available to partisan elites to frame public opinion. Sniderman and Theriault asserted that "political parties and candidates are not free to frame issues however they wish" (2004, 141). This might be true under some conditions; however, our results suggest that parties can be quite powerful in shaping public opinion, not only among their own voters, but also more broadly in the electorate on consensus issues in which citizens do not discriminate as strongly as to which party promotes the frame. Thus, even though we also identified conditions under which citizens can use the party sponsor of a frame to resist persuasion, parties appear to continue to play a vital role by mobilizing and structuring public opinion and hence defining what the political conflicts are actually about.

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