Uncertain Signals: Partisan Cues, Attitudes, and Trade Policy Preferences

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Abstract

How do individuals evaluate specific trade policies? While a rich literature exists regarding individuals' perceptions of trade, current research predominantly focuses on abstract attitudes about trade, without assessing the exact mechanisms for how it is expanded or restricted. This project seeks to flesh out the path through which abstract attitudes map into concrete preferences over trade policy and assess the impact of partisan cues on those preferences. We devise two survey experiments that randomizes parties' stances on a hypothetical US free trade agreement. Evidence from both survey experiments suggests that respondents who receive negative partisan cues—opposition from their own party, or support from their opposing party—have a significantly reduced level of support for the FTA, and are more likely to seek out additional information on trade agreements. In comparison, respondents who receive positive partisan cues demonstrate few behavioral changes. We theorize that instead of serving as information shortcuts, partisan cues on trade policies trigger economic anxiety over the distributive consequences of trade.

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1 Introduction

How do individuals evaluate the quality of a trade agreement? While there exists a rich literature regarding individual preferences for trade, the existing scholarship predominantly focuses on abstract preferences over trade: whether individuals believe trade is good in principle, and whether trade should be expanded or restricted, without evaluating the exact mechanisms for how that aim is achieved. This project seeks to flesh out the path through which abstract attitudes map into concrete preferences, and assess the impact of partisan cues on shaping those preferences.

Trade policy is conducted through various mechanisms, some more visible and politically salient than others. States can amend their tariff schedules to unilaterally raise and lower tariffs; they can impose import quotas or negotiate voluntary export restrictions; and, most visibly and saliently, negotiate and ratify free trade agreements (FTAs) with trading partners. FTAs reciprocally grant preferential market access to its parties, in the form of lower tariffs than those applied to states not party to the agreement. What's more, contemporary trade agreements have spilled over into issue areas beyond those that directly involve the at-border trade of goods. Where trade agreements once simply lowered tariffs, modern agreements are replete with "behind the border" provisions that harmonize regulatory standards between the trading partners, furthering the ease of doing cross-border business, but adding additional layers of complexity to already challenging and often-protracted negotiations. With the failure of the Doha round of World Trade Organization negotiations between 2001 and 2018, these agreements have become the primary mechanism for achieving freer trade between states.

Two branches of the literature in International Political Economy seek to explain individuals' attitudes toward trade. The Open Economy Politics branch takes a broadly rationalist approach to explain attitudes, relying on economic models to impute how individuals should view trade. Individuals who stand to see their economic prospects improved by increased exposure to trade should feel more favorable toward the prospect of expanding trade, and vice versa. Under OEP, this attitudinal support for free trade leads individuals to prefer policies that lead to free trade. On the other hand, a growing behavioralist literature focuses on how individuals' social characteristics

and values dictate their attitudes towards trade, emphasizing the roles of education[1], race[2], gender[3], nationalism and isolationism[4], and ethnocentrism[5]. Mansfield and Mutz (2009) famously conclude that individual attitudes towards trade are dictated not by their own economic self-interest, but by how they perceive trade to impact their nation more broadly.

These divergent branches reconnect in their presumption that these core attitudes towards trade map into preferences over specific policies towards trade. Under OEP, those who stand to gain from openness will support policies that lead to openness, and under the non-rationalist framework, those whose social characteristics predict support for openness will support openness as it manifests in policies.

The populist surge in the West, headlined by the election of Donald Trump in the US and the passage of the Brexit referendum in the UK, brought trade back to the forefront as a touchstone political issue. However, much of the rhetoric employed by 2016's populists focused not on trade as a concept meriting value judgment, but rather on the specific trade agreements and other policies that scaffold national involvement in the global trading order. Donald Trump beat an anti-NAFTA drum in his 2016 stump speech:

> "In this future, we are going to pursue new trade policies that put American workers first – and that keep jobs in our country. All the people who got NAFTA wrong, and China wrong, and who are trying to give us the Trans-Pacific Partnership – are the same failed voices pushing for Hillary Clinton... We've lost one-third of our manufacturing jobs since Bill and Hillary Clinton gave us NAFTA."[6]

Trump took a similar tone in his 2019 State of the Union address:

> "... I don't blame China for taking advantage of us. I blame our leaders and representatives for allowing this travesty to happen. I have great respect for President Xi, and we are now working on a new trade deal with China, but it must include real structural change to end unfair trade practices... Another historic trade blunder was the catastrophe known as NAFTA... for years politicians promised they would renegotiate for a better deal, but no one ever tried until now."[7]

[1] Hainmueller and Hiscox (2006)
[2] Mutz, Mansfield and Kim (2021)
[3] Guisinger (2009), Hiscox and Burgoon (2004), and Mayda and Rodrik (2005)
[4] Mansfield and Mutz (2009), Mutz and Kim (2017/ed)
[5] Guisinger (2017)
[6] *Remarks at a Rally at the Pensacola Bay Center in Pensacola, Florida — The American Presidency Project* (2023-04-09)
[7] *Remarks by President Trump in State of the Union Address – The White House* (2023-04-09)

The pro-Brexit camp maintained a similar stance during the 2016 referendum campaign, contending that the U.K. would negotiate trade agreements with more favorable terms in a bilateral context after leaving the EU.[8]

Both Trump and the Leave campaign emphasized the need to replace "bad deals" with "good deals" that would restore sovereignty and prosperity. This did not necessarily mean less trade; rather, trade on more favorable terms. However, while one can conceptualize more favorable terms vis-à-vis another agreement, what makes terms "favorable" and a deal "good" or "fair" in a vacuum is much more nebulous.

This discrepancy between trade in the abstract and specific trade policy extends beyond just the rhetoric of populist politicians. Recent polling from Gallup suggests that, while trade has become a hot-button political issue, a significant majority of Americans (79% in 2019) saw trade as an opportunity for America, rather than a threat.[9] While most Americans are broadly supportive of trade in the abstract, the perceptions of individual trade agreements are much more mixed. A 2017 Pew poll found that 39% of Americans believed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) had been bad for the country.[10] While it is not entirely surprising that NAFTA faces public hostility following its sharp politicization during the 2016 election, the gap in favorability between NAFTA and its replacement, the 2020 United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), is stark. A 2020 Gallup poll found that 80% of Americans believed the USMCA would be good for the country, compared to 13% who expected deleterious effects on the whole.[11] What makes this gap in favorability striking–and fleshes out this motivating empirical puzzle–is that the USMCA is remarkably similar to NAFTA in both content and objectives.[12] What, then, explains the fissure in public opinion between two otherwise similar agreements?

We argue that the gap between underlying attitudes about trade and preferences over specific agreements can be explained by partisan cues. We evaluate this argument through a series of two survey experiments, which independently confirm that individuals' preferences are moved as a result of partisan cuing. Interestingly, we find that only cues that we theorize should make individuals more hostile to trade have a significant effect. In a follow-up survey experiment, we replicate

[8] *Briefing: Trade, Investment and Jobs Will Benefit If We Vote Leave* (2023-04-09)
[9] Inc (2020)
[10] Stokes (2023-04-09)
[11] Inc (2020)
[12] Luhby (2019)

these findings, and note that those equivalent cues do not have a significant effect on individual preferences over other economic policies–tax and youth employment. We argue that negative cues about a trade agreement trigger economic uncertainty in recipients–an uncertainty unlikely to be caused by tax and youth employment policies–which in turn dictates their negative response to the agreement. This paper blends the literatures on trade attitudes and political communications, and illustrates a novel avenue through which partisan cues impact individual preferences over economic policy.

2 Theory

Scholars of International Political Economy have spent ample energy on the question of what factors dictate attitudes towards trade. Two competing branches of the literature have emerged to answer this question: Open Economy Politics, which emphasizes material factors dictating attitudes, and the Behavioralist literature, which emphasizes non-material explanations for attitude formation.

The Open Economy Politics (OEP) tradition has long been a dominant paradigm in International Political Economy.[13] OEP derives much of its explanatory heft from its reliance on theory from economic models to explain individual attitudes and behavior.[14] To explain attitudes towards trade, OEP generally relies on two competing economic models: the Ricardo-Viner model, and the Heckscher-Ohlin model. Ricardo-Viner assumes that factors of production are immobile across industries within a country, leading pro- and anti-trade coalitions to form along comparative advantage lines, where both labor and capital in exporting industries support pro-trade policies, and both labor and capital in import-competing industries oppose pro-trade policies. Heckscher-Ohlin, rather, assumes that factors are completely mobile across sectors within a country, leading to factor-based coalitions, with the comparatively abundant factor supporting trade, and the comparatively scarce factor opposing trade. Beyond these two core models, the OEP framework has spawned a

[13] Lake (2009); for a critical review of OEP, see Rickard (2021).

[14] Individual attitudes are then aggregated through political institutions to form policies, leading to spillovers as those policies impact global economic conditions and frameworks.

broad tradition for explaining attitudes towards trade[15], and economic policy[16] more broadly, with the central thesis that material interest dictates attitudes.

The Behavioralist literature takes a different approach, relying on non-material factors to explain attitudes toward trade. A key narrative from this literature is that a broad constellation of cosmopolitan characteristics predicts more pro-trade attitudes. Nationalism, isolationism, and ethnocentrism strongly predict hostility towards trade. Mutz, Mansfield and Kim (2021) find that white Americans are significantly more hostile to trade than American minorities, and attribute this finding towards a greater degree of both nationalism and social dominance orientation. Further, the authors find that white Americans prefer to trade with other countries they perceive as white, and are more likely to see trade in zero-sum terms.

A different branch of the Behavioralist literature points to sociotropic attitudes as a predictor of trade attitudes Mansfield and Mutz (2009). In essence, the authors argue that even when individuals perceive that trade might cut against their own material interests, if they perceive that trade is good for the broader country on balance, they will remain supportive. Alkon (2017) extends this logic to local sociotropism, whereby individual identification with their local community has a similar effect: should trade be bad for them but good for their local community, they are still likely to support trade. We rely on both the OEP tradition's predictions and the Behavioralist branch's findings to construct measures of individuals' prior trade attitudes.

Importantly, both the Open Economy Politics branch and Behavioral branch make a key assumption: that attitudes map cleanly into preferences. Individuals whose attitudes are predicted to support trade should support all policies that increase trade, and vice versa. However, both branches struggle to explain the sizable gap in preferences between NAFTA and the USMCA, and between preferences for trade in the abstract and their particular policy manifestations. Moreover, these branches struggle to explain dynamic preferences toward trade policy. Under these research paradigms, should individuals' predictive characteristics change, then their attitudes toward policy should change in turn. When individuals' attitudes are static, they lose their explanatory power. For instance, the broad similarities between NAFTA and the USMCA cast suspicion on an OEP-oriented explanation; individuals would have to perceive the minute differences in how the differ-

[15]For a brief sampling, see Rogowski (2021), Alt et al. (1996), Scheve and Slaughter (2001), Hiscox (2002), and Owen and Johnston (2017).

[16]Frieden (1991), Pandya (2010), among others.

ences in the agreement's terms would trickle into their pocketbooks. Similarly, the Behavioralist literature makes a significant claim to explain the protectionist shift of the late-2010s, pointing to the social characteristics of the growing protectionist camp. However, America's demographic shift since the mid-1990s should predict greater support for pro-trade policies, under the findings of the Behavioralist camp. Further, the behavioralists also struggle to explain the gap in perceptions of NAFTA and the USMCA, as individuals' social characteristics should predict similar support for both agreements.

While both camps have made important contributions to our understanding of attitudes, it is clear that scholarship in International Political Economy would benefit from looking beyond broad attitudes and instead more deeply at preferences for specific agreements.

There is a growing literature on the institutional design characteristics that make individuals more receptive or hostile to specific trade agreements. Brutger and Li (2022) find that an agreement's voting rules have an impact on public support, with heterogeneous effects across partisan lines. Republicans prefer agreements where the US maintains veto power in negotiation—aligning with political psychology work on social dominance orientation, and the more contemporary right-wing emphasis on regaining sovereignty. Conversely, Democrats prefer agreements where neither side has immediate veto power. The authors argue that these rules trickle into the trust that respondents had in their country's negotiators in the agreement, and the greater the degree of trust, the greater the degree of support for the agreement. Further, Perlman and van Lieshout (WP) demonstrate that individuals in the Netherlands are more likely to support agreements that contain regulatory provisions that improve labor standards in the partner country.

However, while contributions to institutional design effects are valuable, their effect on individual preferences can only go as far as individuals are able to learn about an agreement's contents. There are two main avenues through which individuals can learn about an agreement's content: by reading the terms of the agreement themselves, or by receiving a cue from elites.

The structure and design of contemporary trade agreements pose issues for the first avenue. For instance, the USMCA contains 34 chapters–regulating areas ranging from intellectual property and digital trade to environmental protections and labor standards–and totals an eyewatering 930 pages.[17] While the USMCA is beefy, it is a model for contemporary agreements, with its broad

[17] *Excluding* the tariff schedules!

regulatory scope and emphasis on non-trade issues. As agreements have grown more complex in nature, a lay assessment of agreement quality has become a daunting task. Thus, we emphasize elite cues as the more natural avenue for learning about an agreement.

We build on a significant literature on the role of partisan cues in low-information environments. Cues operate as a heuristic, clarifying complex issues and giving voters clarity about whether they should support or oppose the policy at hand. The literature points to two conditions that increase the efficacy of cuing: a lack of information about the issue at hand, and trust. When issues grow more complex and individuals grow less capable of evaluating the issue in a vacuum, they are more susceptible to cues.[18] Further, when individuals are more trusting of the source of their cue, they are more likely to lean on it in their evaluation.[19]

Guisinger (2017) points out that the shift away from manufacturing and towards service work in the US has made the relationship of the average American with trade much less distinct. Combined with the decline of private sector unions—which provide clarity about the expected effects of trade policies on their members—this phenomenon has made the information environment surrounding trade both less political and more opaque, leading individuals to rely more on media frames and other social characteristics in forming their preferences towards specific trade policies. We contend that this diminished salience for relationships between individuals and the effect of trade agreements makes individuals more reliant on partisan cues to form their assessments of agreement quality.

We are not the first to propose a role of partisan cues a method for determining preferences over specific trade agreements. Hicks, Milner and Tingley (2014) argue that partisan cues played a role in shaping Costa Rica's referendum on CAFTA-DR. Naoi and Urata (2013) point to the role of partisan campaigns in increasing information about trade agreements. Neither paper, however, takes our proposed experimental approach.

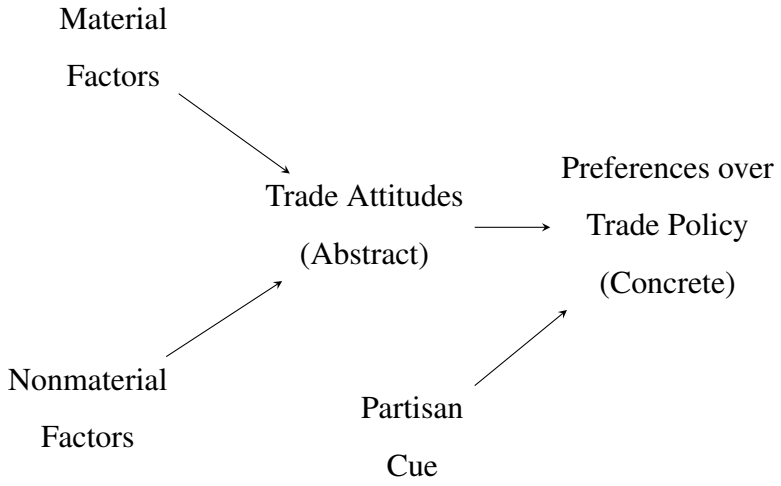
The project most closely related to ours is Dür and Schlipphak (2021), who deploy a survey experiment to test the causal effect of a partisan cue on preferences over a specific trade agreement. Focusing on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) in Spain and Germany, they find evidence for the impact of partisan cues on individual preferences, particularly that negative

[18] Kam (2005), Nicholson (2011), Nicholson (2012), Boudreau and MacKenzie (2014), Bechtel et al. (2015), Guisinger and Saunders (2017), Pannico (2017), Schaffer and Spilker (2019)

[19] Kertzer and Zeitzoff (2017)

cues coming from a "trusted" party reduce respondent support for the agreement. Interestingly, they also find that cues–both positive *and* negative–from "distrusted" sources reduce respondent support for the agreement as well. We believe that a two-party system constitutes a better institutional environment to test the effect of out-party cues, as operationalizing "out-party" to mean "distrusted source"–as the authors do–overlooks the heterogeneous relationship that individuals have with out-parties in a multi-party system. In a two-party system, the relationship between "party" and "trust" is much more distinct, making it an optimal environment to evaluate this dynamic. In addition, the authors do not control for individuals' preexisting trade attitudes before receiving a partisan cue, making it impossible to evaluate how much of individual preferences for the TTIP were the result of the cue vs. prior pro- or anti-trade attitudes.

We argue that, even accounting for preexisting attitudes towards trade, in the low-information environment of trade policy-making, individuals rely predominantly on partisan cues to determine their preferences over actual policy. While individuals may have a vague impression that a trade agreement will deepen economic ties between their country and its trading partners, they seldom have a true sense of the contents of the agreement. It is reasonable that an individual may rely on their gut instinct about trade to form an opinion about a specific agreement in a vacuum. However, we posit that conditional on receiving a partisan cue, individuals take the cue as an accurate representation of the agreement's quality and reassess their preferences to align with the cue.



From our theory flows three main hypotheses, each with secondary testable implications:

$\boldsymbol{H_1}$: Receiving an in-party cue will lead to a greater degree of alignment with the direction of the cue.

$\boldsymbol{H_{1a}}$: **Positive in-party** cue will lead to greater **support** for a specific agreement.

$\boldsymbol{H_{1b}}$: **Negative in-party** cue will lead to greater **opposition** to a specific agreement.

$\boldsymbol{H_2}$: Receiving an out-party cue will lead to a greater degree of misalignment with the direction of the cue.

$\boldsymbol{H_{2a}}$: **Positive out-party** cue will lead to greater **opposition** to a specific agreement.

$\boldsymbol{H_{2b}}$: **Negative out-party** cue will lead to greater **support** for a specific agreement.

$\boldsymbol{H_3}$: Receiving a bipartisan cue will lead to alignment with the direction of the cue.

$\boldsymbol{H_{3a}}$: **Positive bipartisan** cue will lead to greater **support** for a specific agreement.

$\boldsymbol{H_{3b}}$: **Negative bipartisan** cue will lead to greater **opposition** to a specific agreement.

We emphasize that individuals' relationships with parties matter. We argue that individuals rely on information provided by their party to form an assessment of the agreement's quality, particularly from the perspective of that party's voters. For instance, where there is inter-party heterogeneity in preferences over institutional design, the party cue serves as a signal that the agreement takes on the characteristics of an agreement more favorable for the party base. The cue may also signal that the economic effects will be positive for party supporters, giving in-party cue recipients confidence that the agreement will be good for their pocketbook or their community.

Conversely, we argue that out-party cues will have the opposite effect. Learning that the opposition party supports the agreement may give voters a sense that the agreement contains provisions and effects that align with the opposition's priorities–either redistributional or political–making the agreement less palatable.

Both the in-party and out-party effects should be impacted by the degree of trust the voter places in the parties; warm feelings should amplify the alignment effect of in-party cues and diminish the discordant effect of out-party cues, and vice-versa.

In addition, we argue that bipartisan cues have a preponderance effect. When receiving a bipartisan cue either supporting or opposing the agreement, individuals receive overwhelming information about the agreement's quality from those with the greatest degree of information about the agreement. Moreover, bipartisan cues should be less likely to activate affective polarization,[20]

[20]Iyengar et al. (2019)

as individuals are not being primed to think of the agreement in partisan terms. If both parties overwhelmingly support the agreement, voters can feel confident that the deal will be broadly good for the country; bipartisan opposition should convey that the deal is of poor quality and thus should be opposed.

Cues about policy need not simply come simply from parties – individuals can learn about policy through a variety of avenues. Media framing and opinion pieces from the policy intelligentsia can cue the public about what stances to take on policy, as can conversations with co-partisans and friends. However, we contend that partisan cues from party elites should be most meaningful. Party elites not only have access to presumably the greatest degree of information about the agreement–a function of their need to publicly vote for or against the agreement–but also maintain a high degree of credibility about whether the agreement is in the best interests of their constituents and the party's base. Thus, we conduct our analysis on cues from party elites rather than other elite sources.

3 Design

To test our theory and hypotheses, we deployed a novel survey experiment, carried out in March 2023 through Harvard's Digital Lab for the Social Sciences (DLABSS).[21]. The discussed survey and presented results are for this project's pilot survey; we plan to run an additional survey through a paid platform to correct for any panel-related bias and procure a more nationally-represented sample in a future wave.

The experiment centered around a hypothetical Free Trade Agreement between the United States and the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom was selected for its status as a clear ally of the United States and as a legitimate candidate for a bilateral FTA, following the Brexit referendum in 2020. Further, it stands to reason that as a large economy and well-known country, American political parties would be likely to take a visible stance on the agreement.[22] We intend to include additional countries in future waves.

[21]DLABSS maintains a volunteer, opt-in panel of survey respondents Despite being an opt-in panel, DLABSS performs comparably to paid services like Lucid and Amazon's Mechanical Turk. For more on DLABSS, see Strange et al. (2019)

[22]Dür and Schlipphak (2021) use a similar logic for the TTIP.

Our effective sample is $n = 964$. Our treatment and control groups were approximately balanced on relevant covariates. For more on our sample balance, see Appendix Fig. 1.

All respondents were given the following prompt:

> *"The United States has finished negotiating a free trade agreement with the United Kingdom. The agreement will now go to Congress, which will vote to either ratify– accepting the terms of agreement–or reject the agreement. The agreement would reduce tariffs and protective barriers on consumer goods in both countries. As a result, it is expected that the agreement will increase trade between the U.S. and the U.K. The agreement also regulates investment, intellectual property, and environmental protection in both countries."*

One-seventh of respondents were presented with no more information about the agreement than above. The remaining respondents were then randomly assigned a treatment across two dimensions: the source of a partisan cue, and the direction (supportive of the agreement or opposed to the agreement). For example, the "Republican Support" prompt read *"Most Congressional Republicans support ratifying the agreement."* The remaining cases were: "Democratic Support," "Democratic Oppose," and "Republican Oppose." Some respondents instead received a bipartisan prompt, which read: *"Most Congressional Democrats and Congressional Republicans support/oppose ratifying the agreement."*

Treatment Conditions		
Democratic Support	Republican Support	Bipartisan Support
Democratic Oppose	Republican Oppose	Bipartisan Oppose

The prompt is designed to give respondents a view of the agreement at the stage where their assessment of the agreement's quality would have the greatest impact on whether the agreement becomes law. Were the agreement still under negotiation, the terms of the agreement would be nebulous and fluid, with less ability for respondents to assess the agreement's quality. Moreover, the mid-negotiation would be under the purview of the US Trade Representative and, more broadly, the Executive Branch, giving individuals less leverage over whether the agreement will be enacted than when the agreement's fate lies with Congress. On the other hand, were the hypothetical

agreement already ratified, there would be little need for parties to cue their voters and curry broad favor for the agreement. Under this construction, respondents' opinions about the agreement would have the most leverage, making this the optimal time for parties to cue the public about the agreement's quality.

The prompt also sought to give respondents a short summary of the agreement's content. A key logic in the elite cuing literature is the idea that elites have a greater degree of information than the public in low-information issue areas. We expected respondents to know that trade agreements generally lead to an increase in trade–both on the intensive and extensive margin–between signatories. However, as trade agreements have become more complex, often including a multitude of chapters on behind-the-border regulatory issues, we included references to how the agreement would regulate investment, intellectual property, and environmental protection. We used the term "regulate" to minimize respondents' understanding of what those chapters would do, so as to avoid priming respondents to be more positive or negative about the agreement simply through the inclusion of those chapters. Further, this would make the lower degree of information that individuals have about the agreement more salient, mirroring the complex reality of assessing trade agreement quality.

In the treatments, we used the language of "Congressional Democrats" and "Congressional Republicans" in order to avoid invoking individual leaders or other polarizing figures in the parties, which could induce bias in the way respondents take up the cue treatment. Moreover, we focused on Congressional party members because the prompt mentions that the agreement would go to Congress, meaning that this is the group with the most direct control over whether the agreement will become law, making their assessment more important than other potential elite commentators. We also chose to include the language of "Most" for realism, allowing the parties to have imperfect discipline on issues as charged as trade. With that said, the broader takeaway from the cue is clear: most of those (from one party/both parties) who have been briefed on the agreement's content and likely effects, and those who will decide to ratify or reject the agreement, perceive it to be good (bad).

Respondents' preferences for the FTA were measured across five dimensions, using 7-point Likert scale: support for the agreement, belief that agreement would benefit America, belief that the agreement would benefit them, belief that the agreement would benefit their local community, and

belief that the agreement would cause employment or unemployment. Additionally, we collected pre-treatment attitudes towards trade in the abstract, following from prior work in both the OEP and behavioralist tradition. These attitudes include: belief that the US should trade more with other countries; belief that the US would benefit from trading more with other countries; belief that they would benefit from the US trading more with other countries; belief that people like them would benefit from trading more from other countries; and belief that their local community would benefit from the US trading more with other countries. We then created index variables of pre-treatment attitudes for our analysis. All likerts were scaled from -3 to 3, with 0 for the neutral midpoint. To control for potential results driven by prior feelings about the United Kingdom, [23] we also asked respondents to complete a feeling thermometer about the United Kingdom, as well as the other UN Security Council permanent members (China, France, and Russia) to avoid potential priming effects prior to treatment.

In addition to the standard age, race, and education battery of covariates, we collected a number of other relevant covariates, across political, social, and economic dimensions. Along the political dimension, respondents were asked to provide their political affiliation and self-reported political leaning; 2012, 2016, 2020 Presidential vote and 2022 midterm party support; and a feeling thermometer to measure warmth of feelings for both parties, which we use as a proxy for receptivity a cue from that sender. In the economic dimension, we collected information on respondent income, employment status, occupation, sector of employment, union status, and if relevant, union of membership. In the social dimension, respondents provided their ZIP codes and assessment of their community as urban, suburban, or rural.

We also sought to evaluate the information sources respondents sought out to learn more about trade agreements. In doing so, we exposed respondents to an opt-in information board following the survey's completion. After completing the demographic battery at the end of the survey, respondents were told that they were finished with the survey and free to leave; however, if they wanted to learn more about America's trade agreements, the authors collected a number of articles, statements, and projections about a recent US Trade Agreement (The 2012 U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement, or KORUS). We included an article from Reuters (centrist/informational), the New York Times (left-leaning), and Fox News (right-leaning), as well as statements from Busi-

[23] Carnegie and Gaikwad (2022),Brutger and Li (2022)

ness Leaders, Union Leaders, and projections from Economists about the agreement's expected effects.[24] A total of 484 respondents (50%) clicked on at least one link on the Information Board. We discuss our analysis of the Information Board in the Results section.

4 Results

We theorize that two elements of partisan cues jointly shape individuals' preference toward specific trade agreements: the *source* (in-group/out-group/bipartisan cues) and the *direction* (supportive/opposing cues) of partisan cues. Therefore, with slight abuses of notation, we estimate the effect of partisan cues on individuals' preference toward the US-UK agreement using the following linear regression:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{SOURCE}_i \times \text{DIRECTION}_i) + \sum_{k=2}^{K} \beta_k X_{ki} + \epsilon_i \tag{1}$$

in which X represents a $i \times k$ covariate matrix, for which a summary of the descriptive statistics can be found in table A.1. In addition, SOURCE is a categorical variable computed by interacting treated respondents' party ID with the party they receive in the survey prompt. Similarly, DIRECTION is a binary variable denoting whether the treated respondent received a prompt that indicates support or opposition toward the trade agreement. Taken together, the interaction between SOURCE and DIRECTION uniquely identifies whether a respondent is assigned to the control group, or to one of the six treatment groups. Therefore, we can estimate six sets of coefficients that document the treatment effects of partisan cues. Figure 1 visualizes the point estimates of treatments on binary outcomes[25] as well as the 95% confidence intervals for each treatment group:

As shown in fig. 1, the survey experiment confirms half of our original hypotheses: Respondents who receive (1) an in-party oppose cue; (2) a bipartisan oppose cue; or (3) an out-party support cue have a significantly reduced level of support for the U.S.-U.K. trade agreement. More specifically, an in-party oppose cue reduces a respondent's likelihood to support the agreement by 22% ($\sim$ 0.57 standard deviation of the outcome variable); a bipartisan oppose cue reduces a

[24] For more detail on the contents of the Information Board, see Appendix.

[25] The binary outcomes are coded by dichotomizing the responses from the original Likert (seven-point) scale. Figure A.1 in the appendix shows that the result is robust to the various measurements of the outcome variables

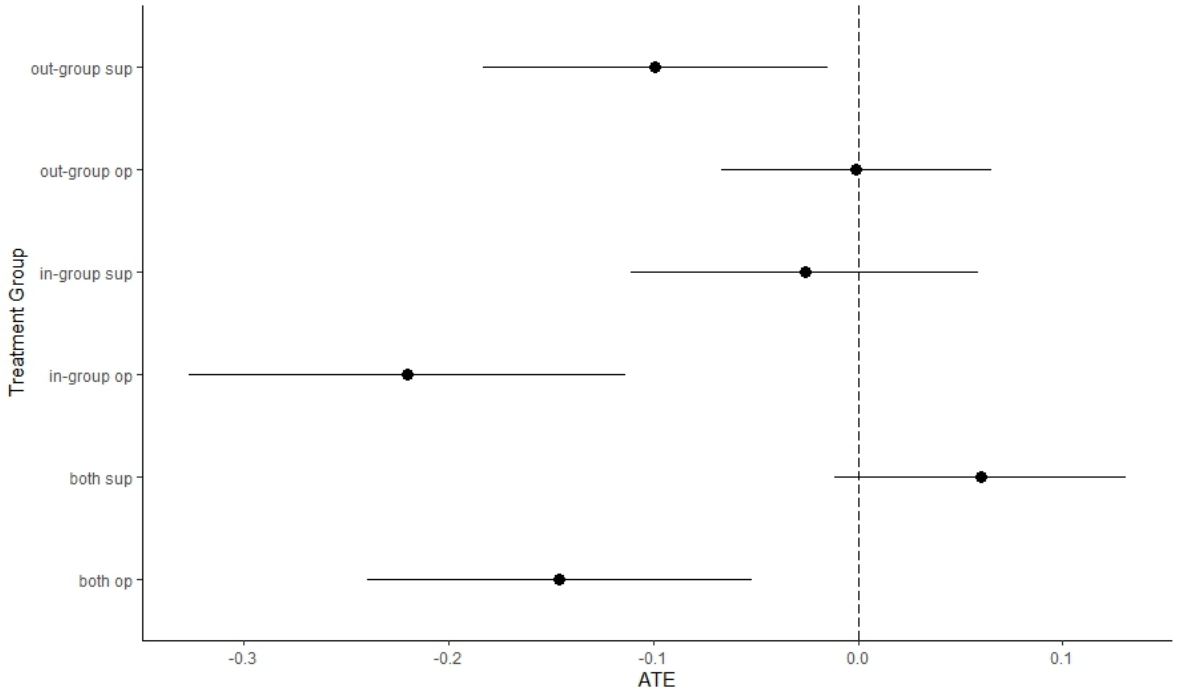


Figure 1: Effects of Partisan Cues on Trade Agreement Preferences

respondent's likelihood to support the agreement by 15% ($\sim$ 0.38 sd); and an in-party oppose cue reduces a respondent's likelihood to support the agreement by 10% ($\sim$ 0.26 sd). In contrast, the preferences among respondents who receive other cues (in-party support, bipartisan support, or out-party oppose) are statistically indistinguishable from the respondents who did not receive any partisan cues. In other words, the experiment finds empirical support *only* for the hypotheses that propose a *negative* effect. Table A.2 presents the full result of our regression analysis.

While it is possible that the asymmetric effects of partisan cues may result from a potential ceiling effect–about 80% of the respondents indicate that they either somewhat support, support, or greatly support ratifying the agreement–a similar pattern is found when we decompose the information encoded in the partisan cues. Figure 2 visualizes the effects of partisan cues on respondents' beliefs about the agreement's potential impact. Despite the baseline responses for these questions being lower than the average support for the agreement in general, respondents who receive a negative cue (i.e., in-party oppose, bipartisan oppose, or out-party support) are significantly less likely to believe that the trade agreement benefits themselves, their local communities, as well as the US as a whole. Conversely, the positive cues do not alter respondents' beliefs regarding the potential effects of the trade agreement.

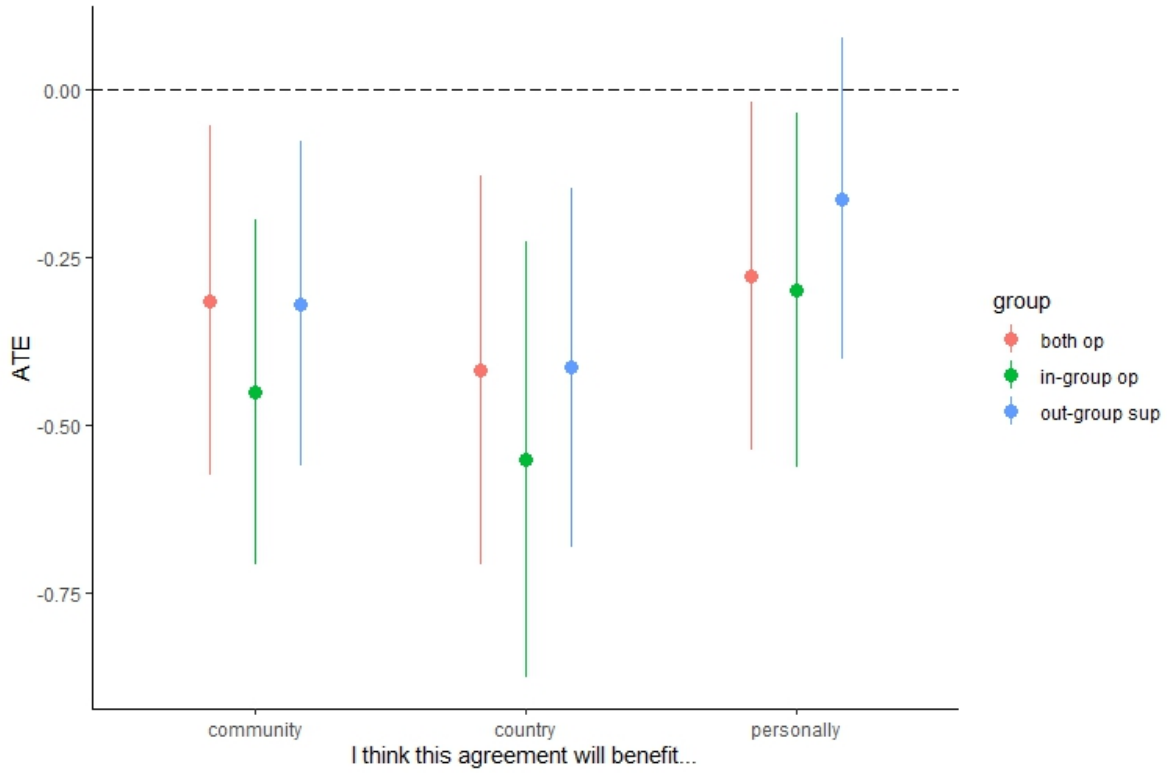


Figure 2: Effects of Partisan Cues on Respondents' Belief of Agreement Impact

5 Discussion and Follow-Up Survey

While we are unable to rule out the possibility of a ceiling effect within our current sample, the relatively robust pattern nevertheless suggests that it might be worthwhile to rationalize the asymmetric effect of partisan cues. To explain why respondents are more sensitive to negative cues, we posit that negative cues disproportionately increase respondents' economic anxiety and uncertainty. Gains from trade are more diffusely distributed within an economy, making positive partisan cues less informative in terms of individuals' utility outcomes in the event of trade liberalization. In contrast, trade shocks are more locally concentrated and intensive at an individual level (Autor, Dorn and Hanson, 2016). Negative partisan cues can therefore provide information on who will potentially be experiencing such adverse effects of trade. Therefore, instead of serving only information shortcuts that people draw on symmetrically in both directions, partisan cues may primarily serve as information triggers that spur further searches for information in order to mitigate anxiety. As such, we provide the following competing hypotheses that contrast the potential mechanisms of partisan cues:

$\mathbf{H_{4a}}$(Information Shortcut): Receiving a negative cue will lead to a reduced likelihood of seeking further information

$\mathbf{H_{4b}}$(Information Trigger): Receiving a negative cue will lead to an increased likelihood of seeking further information

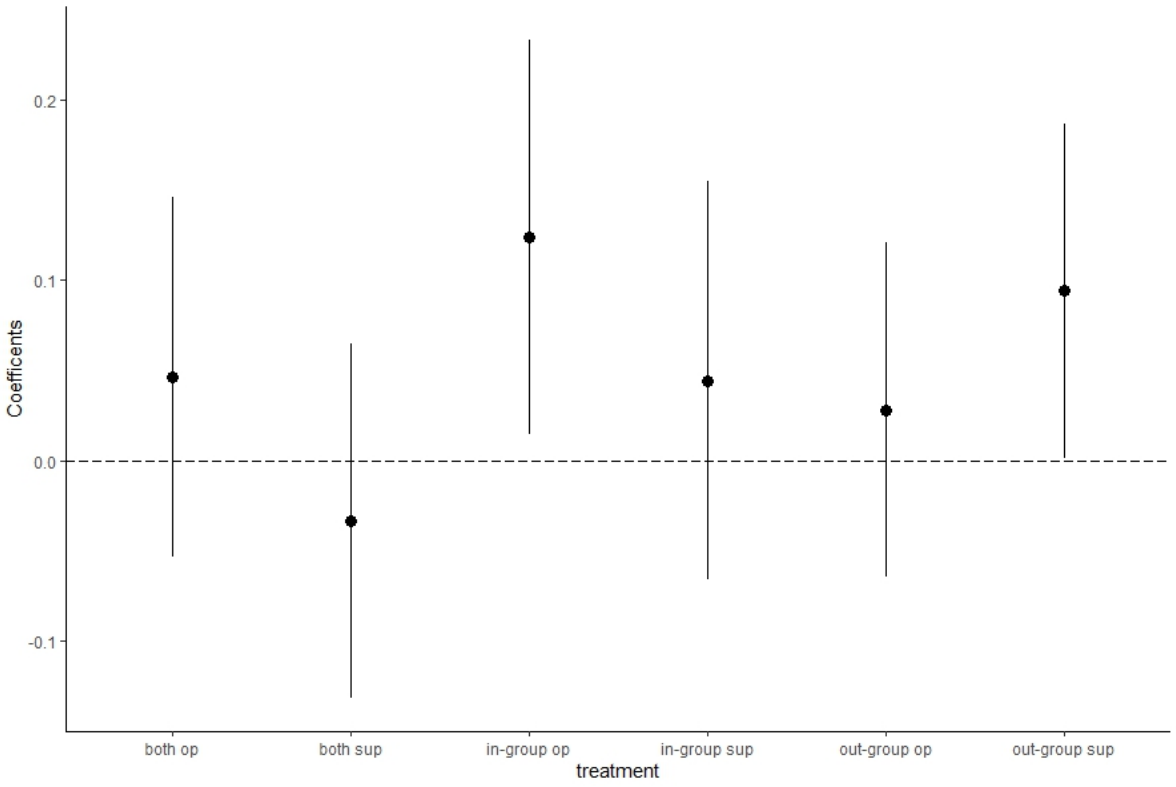


Figure 3: Effects of Partisan Cues on Information Search

The information board included in our experiment provides an initial test for the above hypotheses. Figure 3 provides the result of a series of t-tests between the control group and treatment groups. The outcome variable is a binary variable indicating whether the respondent searched for at least one piece of information provided to them. The results partially support the information trigger hypothesis as respondents who receive the in-party oppose or out-party support prompts are more likely to search for additional information (11% and 9%, respectively).

To further evaluate our theoretical mechanism about the uniqueness of partisan cues in the realm of trade policy, we propose:

$\mathbf{H_5}$(Uniqueness of Trade Policy): Partisan Cues affects respondents' preferences towards distributive policies differently across issue areas.

To more directly evaluate our theory about the disparity between positive and negative partisan cues in trade policy, and evaluate the uniqueness of partisan cues in trade policy vs. other policies, we conducted a second survey with a similar but distinct experimental treatment. Our second survey was also conducted on the DLABSS platform, in mid-July of 2023. Our effective sample is $n = 974$.

Our second survey exposed respondents to information about three different policies, varying the received partisan cue across respondents. The three policies of exposure were: trade policy, tax policy, and youth employment policy. All respondents were given the following three prompts:

> **Trade:** *"The United States has finished negotiating a free trade agreement with Japan. The agreement will now go to Congress, which will vote to either ratify–accepting the terms of agreement–or reject the agreement. The agreement would reduce tariffs and protective barriers on consumer goods in both countries. As a result, it is expected that the agreement will increase trade between the U.S. and Japan."*
>
> **Tax:** *"Congress has finished debating and is preparing to vote on a bill that would cut income taxes by 2% for all households earning less than $100,000 per year."*
>
> **Youth Employment:** *"Currently, many states in the US currently require employers to obtain a permit when hiring youth workers under the age of 16. Congress has finished debating and is preparing to vote on a bill that would relax youth labor regulations, meaning that employers would no longer have to apply for a permit to hire workers 14 years old and above."*

Those receiving the control saw no more than the above text, for all three policies. Among the treated, respondents were given one of four treatment arms for each experiment. Unlike in our first survey, which–save for the Bipartisan treatments–exposed respondents to a unidirectional cue from just one party, we chose here to expose all treated respondents to a cue from both major parties. This affords us greater statistical leverage by shrinking the treatment conditions from 6 to 4, while making explicit the implication that "one party supports, the other likely opposes." Thus, the language for each of the treatments read: *"Most Congressional Democrats support/oppose the bill, and most Congressional Republicans oppose/support the bill."* and *"Most Congressional Democrats and Congressional Republicans support/oppose the bill."*

Treatment Conditions (Second Survey)	
Democratic Support, Republican Oppose	Bipartisan Support
Republican Support, Democratic Oppose	Bipartisan Oppose

Respondents received the trade policy prompt first, then answered a handful of questions about the policy. The post-treatment questions were as follows:

1. *"Would you support Congress passing this proposed law?"*

2.*"Do you think **the US** will benefit from or be harmed by this proposed law?"*

3.*"Do you think that **you** will benefit from or be harmed by this proposed law?"*

4.*"Do you think that **your local community** will benefit from or be harmed by this proposed law?"*

5.*"Do you think this proposed law will **increase employment** (more jobs) or **decrease employment** (fewer jobs) in the US?"*

6.*"Thinking about this proposed law from a **moral point of view**, do you think this law is right or wrong?"*

Respondents then received the tax prompt and accompanying follow-up questions, then the labor prompt and its follow-up questions. For each of these questions save for morality, respondents selected from a 7-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from *"Strongly support-Strongly oppose," "Entirely benefit-Entirely harmed,"* and *"Increase employment by a lot-Decrease employment by a lot."* For morality, they selected from a five-point scale, ranging from *"Very right-Very wrong."*

We selected tax policy and youth employment policy as alternative policies to test the effects of partisan cues, as they help provide clear tests of our hypotheses about how triggering economic uncertainty is the mechanism through which negative cues affect preferences over trade policy. As discussed above, the negative distributive consequences of trade agreements are concentrated, while the gains are diffuse, and due to the complicated nature of international trade, it stands to reason that the public has a more difficult time interpreting how trade will affect them. In turn, a negative cue about the agreement could signal to the respondent that *they* might be among those bearing the concentrated costs. We contrast this logic with tax policy, whereby respondents can much more clearly evaluate ex ante whether they will be positively or negatively affected by the

tax cut; respondents know whether they fall above or below the $100,000 income line, and thus are more certain about the affect of the policy on *them*. The partisan cue still tells recipients that the party thinks the policy would be overall positive/negative for the country, but the cue weakens as a heuristic for interpreting the projected effect on the individual. The youth employment prompt takes a different angle, as loosening restrictions on youth employment is a policy area where individuals' preferences are guided by self-held moral principles. Further, individuals can reasonably assume that they will not experience any noticeable distributive gain or loss as a result of loosened youth employment regulations, making a negative cue less informative about distributive consequences. While a partisan cue may signal that the party thinks this legislation overall would be good policy, it is less likely to move respondents from their moral-oriented preference. Thus, a negative cue for either tax and youth employment policies should do little to stimulate economic uncertainty in respondents, allowing us to test the effects of our uncertainty mechanism.

The results of our survey demonstrate support for our proposed mechanism. Figure 4 visualizes a series of t-tests between the control and treatment groups. The outcome variable is a binary indicator of support for the prompted policy, with respondents indicating any degree of support receiving a 1 and all others receiving a 0. As predicted by our theory about triggered economic uncertainty serving as the mechanism, the treatments that should stimulate economic uncertainty– a negative in-party cue or a positive out-party cue–demonstrate statistically significant differences in support than the control condition. In no other treatment, across all three issues, do we see statistically significant differences in support between treated and control groups.

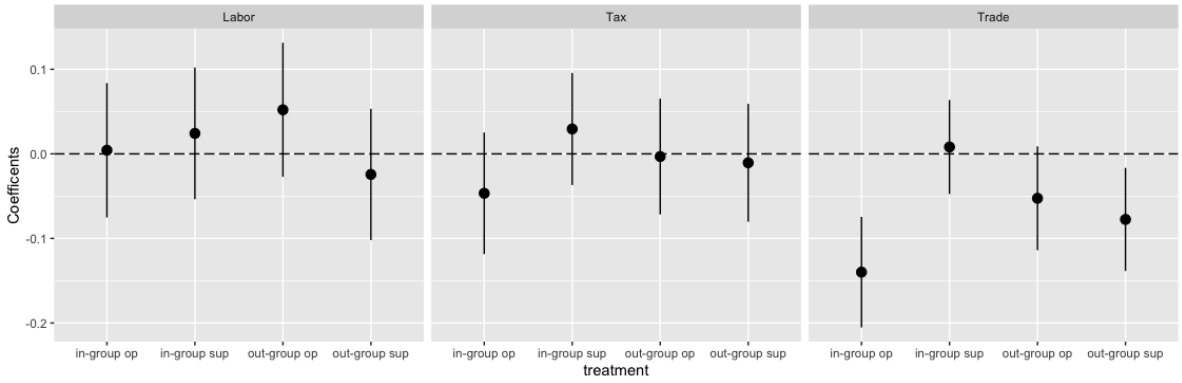


Figure 4: Effect of Partisan Cue Type by Policy Treatment

In addition to providing support for our proposed mechanism underwriting the uniqueness

of partisan cues about trade policy, these results also replicate the findings of our first experiment: respondents are only moved by cases that we predict would make them more hostile to the agreement–when their preferred party opposes the agreement, and when their opposition party supports the agreement. These results replicate under a design with a different country–here Japan, rather than the United Kingdom–helping to alleviate potential concerns about the racial/ethnic composition Mutz, Mansfield and Kim (2021) or other country-specific characteristics Kim et al. (2023) of the trading partner. Japan also serves as a reasonably clean stand-in for the United Kingdom, as a large advanced economy, clear US security ally, and well-known country with whom a proposed trade agreement would likely draw public comment from legislators.

It is important to note that the results from Figure 4 fold the bipartisan treatments in with polarized party cues. Individuals thus received two classifications. A democrat, for instance, who received a "Bipartisan Support" cue would be classified as both "In-group support" and "Out-group support." A Republican receiving "Republican Support Democrat Oppose" would be considered "In-group support" and "Out-group oppose." This allows us to increase the statistical power of our analysis. While this is a near direct replication of our prior findings, the differences in subgroups as a result of our experimental design prevent these findings from serving as a $1:1$ replication.

6 Conclusion

International trade does not take place in a vacuum. As an increasing amount of trade falls under the regularization of trade agreements, the gap in public opinion between trade and trade policy becomes a salient phenomenon that merits further investigation. This project blends the robust literature in political communication and behavior on elite cuing in low-information environments with the rich IPE literature on trade attitudes. In doing so, we developed a novel survey experiment, testing the causal effect of partisan cues on support for a hypothetical free trade agreement. Our pilot results provide early evidence of a differential effect, whereby the cues that should make respondents more hostile to an agreement dominate cues that should make respondents receptive to an agreement.

The broad contribution of this paper is to bring both trade policy and partisan cuing into the study of trade. Though the political communication literature emphasizes the importance of parti-

san cues in all low information environments, trade policy poses a particularly valuable test case because the literature in IPE has such clear predictions–backed by substantial economic and psychological theory–about how individuals should form preferences. Moreover, unlike the literature's conventional understanding of partisan cues–where cues operate as heuristics and shortcuts–we find differential effects that indicate how partisan cues may generate further uncertainty about distributional effects, leading individuals to an increased concern about the effects of trade liberalization brought about by particular agreements. Across two different survey experiments, we find statistically significant effects of cues that should make respondents more hostile to the trade agreement in question, supporting the hypothesis that cue efficacy is a function of triggering economic anxiety.

That negative cues are effective in trade indicates that it can be a viable political strategy for mobilizing voters against the international trade regime. Distinct from a previous era where most Americans' expressed muted preferences around trade–triaging trade negotiation to the realm of firms, interest groups, and elites–the 2016 election demonstrated that voters' trade preferences have consequences for not simply the global trading order, but elections and international cooperation.

For the next wave of the experiment, we propose to collect direct measurements regarding participants' economic anxiety post-treatment. It is also possible that the behavior of seeking out additional information could be the result of respondents being surprised by a treatment which contains information misaligned with their understanding of party positions on trade, making the finding an artifact of experimental design. For instance, a Democrat who receives an in-group oppose cue might find the information counter-intuitive, and therefore becomes motivated to seek out confirmatory evidence justifying the party's "stated" position. We plan to more directly interrogate our proposed mechanism and evaluate *why* respondents sought out new information in the next wave of this project.

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Appendix: Tables and Figures

	n	mean	sd	min	max
outcome_support_binary_scale	964.00	0.80	0.39	0.00	1.00
outcome_support_narrow_scale	964.00	0.71	0.64	-1.00	1.00
outcome_support_full_scale	964.00	1.49	1.42	-3.00	3.00
white	964.00	0.82	0.39	0.00	1.00
male	964.00	0.64	0.48	0.00	1.00
college	964.00	0.65	0.48	0.00	1.00
Democrats	964.00	0.40	0.49	0.00	1.00
union	964.00	0.09	0.29	0.00	1.00
unemployed	964.00	0.03	0.16	0.00	1.00
income_low	964.00	0.14	0.35	0.00	1.00
income_mid	964.00	0.46	0.50	0.00	1.00
UK_warm	956.00	0.94	0.24	0.00	1.00
Pretreatment: Trade More	964.00	0.52	1.39	-3.00	3.00
Pretreatment: US Benefit	964.00	0.55	1.42	-3.00	3.00
Pretreatment: Personally Benefit	964.00	0.07	1.37	-3.00	3.00
Pretreatment: People Benefit	964.00	0.24	1.32	-3.00	3.00
Pretreatment: Community Benefit	964.00	0.27	1.44	-3.00	3.00

Table A.1: Summary Statistics

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
In-party Support	−0.005					
	(0.047)					
In-party Oppose		−0.189				
		(0.056)				
Out-party Support			−0.130			
			(0.047)			
Out-party Oppose				−0.019		
				(0.039)		
Bipartisan Support					0.062	
					(0.036)	
Bipartisan Oppose						−0.150
						(0.048)
Democrat	−0.016	0.086	0.115	0.110	0.083	0.099
	(0.051)	(0.061)	(0.047)	(0.041)	(0.037)	(0.044)
white	0.086	0.058	−0.058	0.005	−0.065	0.011
	(0.079)	(0.088)	(0.067)	(0.056)	(0.036)	(0.070)
male	−0.082	0.078	0.042	0.002	0.057	0.057
	(0.051)	(0.070)	(0.048)	(0.044)	(0.044)	(0.053)
college	0.006	0.024	−0.079	−0.039	−0.021	−0.067
	(0.051)	(0.064)	(0.050)	(0.047)	(0.036)	(0.050)
unemployed	−0.474	−0.551	−0.032	−0.806	−0.187	−0.491
	(0.253)	(0.118)	(0.109)	(0.141)	(0.136)	(0.343)
Mid Income	0.004	0.175	0.029	0.052	−0.033	0.083
	(0.062)	(0.140)	(0.074)	(0.071)	(0.064)	(0.081)
High Income	0.008	0.174	−0.049	0.032	−0.039	0.062
	(0.060)	(0.143)	(0.076)	(0.076)	(0.062)	(0.083)
Feeling towards the UK	0.192	0.254	0.511	0.159	0.222	0.327
	(0.152)	(0.144)	(0.112)	(0.128)	(0.128)	(0.114)
union	0.001	−0.098	−0.099	−0.022	−0.062	0.013
	(0.071)	(0.094)	(0.084)	(0.070)	(0.069)	(0.091)
Trade.More.pre	−0.037	0.078	0.023	0.001	−0.012	−0.066
	(0.028)	(0.050)	(0.034)	(0.039)	(0.025)	(0.038)
US.Benefit.pre	0.095	−0.029	−0.025	0.016	0.021	0.076
	(0.031)	(0.050)	(0.035)	(0.036)	(0.027)	(0.036)
Personally.Benefit.pre	−0.013	0.063	−0.002	0.039	0.042	0.032
	(0.028)	(0.050)	(0.032)	(0.035)	(0.027)	(0.043)
People.Benefit.pre	−0.030	−0.055	0.024	−0.052	−0.057	−0.040
	(0.033)	(0.055)	(0.038)	(0.038)	(0.030)	(0.045)
Community.Benefit.pre	0.046	0.035	0.061	0.054	0.048	0.035
	(0.021)	(0.032)	(0.028)	(0.023)	(0.021)	(0.029)
(Intercept)	0.634	0.302	0.436	0.679	0.713	0.713
	(0.163)	(0.199)	(0.140)	(0.130)	(0.137)	(0.137)
Num.Obs.	184	188	232	232	226	226
R2	0.202	0.258	0.261	0.174	0.162	0.162
R2 Adj.	0.130	0.193	0.209	0.117	0.102	0.102

Table A.2: Regression Results (DV: Support for the US-UK agreement)

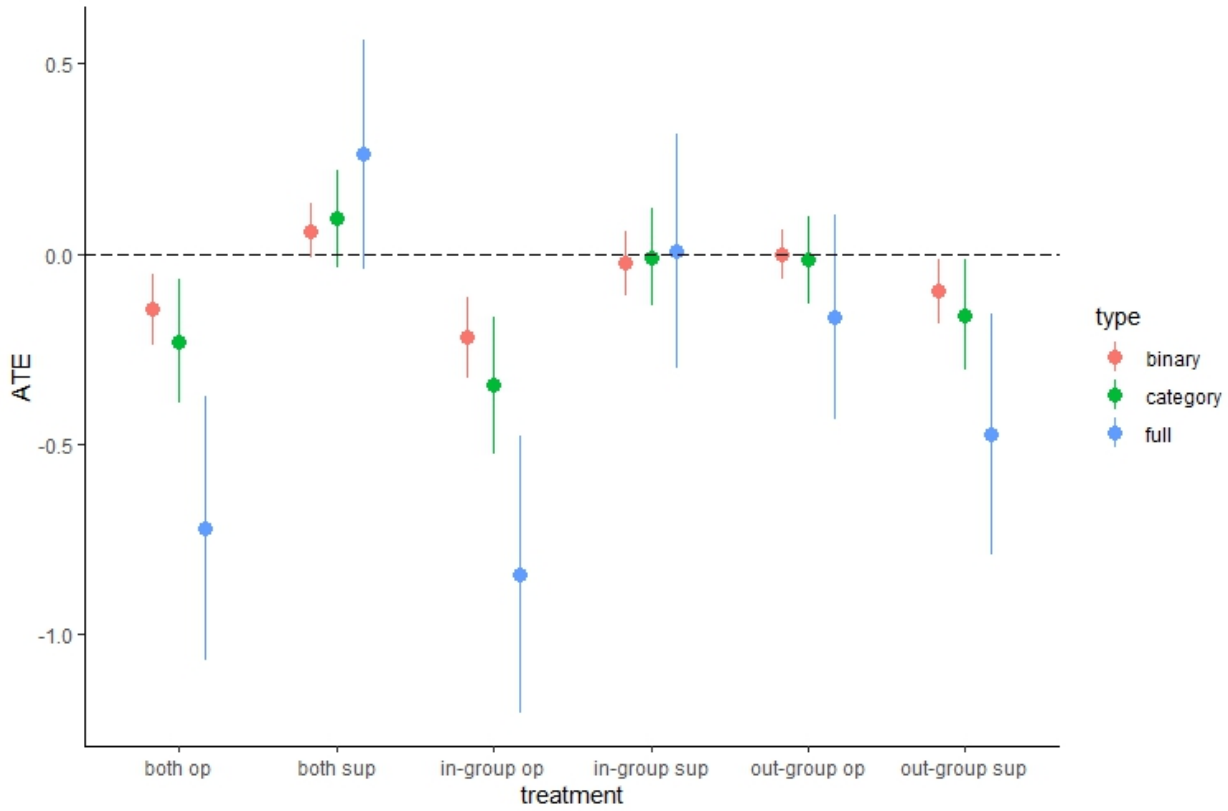

Figure A.1: Effects of Partisan Cues on Trade Agreement Preferences: Binary, Categorical, and Full Scale

Content presented in the Information Board are adapted from the following sources: Reuters[26], New York Times[27], Fox News[28], Economists[293031], Business Leaders[32], Union Leaders[33].

We presented excerpts from the above sources in the experimental survey flow, one by one, so that respondents could click on multiple links without being removed from the survey. This also allowed the authors to take time-spent and clicks-per-page measurements.

[26] https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE6B25GJ20101204

[27] https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/04/business/global/04trade.html?searchResultPosition=8

[28] https://www.foxnews.com/world/south-korea-passes-u-s-free-trade-agreement-lawmaker-sets-off-tear-gas-canister-in-protest

[29] https://www.piie.com/sites/default/files/publications/pb/pb07-7.pdf

[30] https://files.epi.org/2013/WorkingPaper289-2.pdf

[31] https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R41660.html#ifn13

[32] https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2010/12/03/statements-support-us-korea-trade-agreement

[33] https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/09/business/global/09trade.html

If you would like to learn more about the content and effects of the US's trade agreements, we have collected a number of statements and reports, from a variety of sources, about a recent US free trade agreement (not necessarily the one you just read about). Click the boxes below if you would like to read what they had to say about it. Otherwise, click "None" to proceed to the end of the survey.

Figure A.2: Information Board