

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Collaborative Research: Alternative Cue-Givers, the Media, and U.S. Public Opinion

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We propose a project that investigates the influence of non-party political actors such as interest groups, social movements, and foreign officials on U.S. media coverage and public opinion. The project explores the circumstances under which these “alternative cue-givers” (ACGs)—individuals and groups who are not part of government or the major political parties—appear in news coverage of policy debates, and the conditions under which such voices affect Americans’ political attitudes. Our study is particularly pressing at a time when actors beyond the halls of the U.S. government, from the National Rifle Association (NRA) to Occupy Wall Street to international organizations, have emerged as prominent elements of the political landscape.

We develop a framework to explain how ACGs’ presence in the media can alter the information that is available to citizens, and we show how these messages can, in turn, influence people’s political judgments. We broaden the standard conceptualization of the “information environment” by showing that ACGs are common participants in U.S. political debate and that they can affect public opinion, sometimes even leading citizens to reject cues from their own party leaders. In doing so, we demonstrate that the extent to which party elites can dominate public opinion depends heavily on the news media’s willingness to devote attention to outside voices. When and if the media consistently incorporate ACGs into policy debates, mass opinion is less likely to reflect the positions of institutional elites. Because messages from these outside voices have the potential to widen the parameters of political debate and inform public opinion, the lack of attention to ACGs is an important oversight in the existing literature.

Part 1: Alternative Cue-Givers and the News Media

Our project has two components. The first entails a systematic exploration of the conditions under which alternative cue-givers appear in the news. We define ACGs as any political actors (individuals or groups) who are not U.S. government officials or representatives of the two major parties. This includes a wide range of voices, from protest organizations and interest groups to scientists and United Nations bureaucrats to ordinary citizens (American or foreign). These actors share the key characteristic of not holding formalized, institutional power in the U.S. political system. We do not, however, claim that ACGs all have equal access to political power. Indeed, many of them can be described as “elites” of one kind or another, while others are situated closer to the grassroots. Still, as will become clear below, their positions outside formal political institutions mark them as distinct conceptual category in the context of media and public opinion, and this distinct identity has important empirical and normative implications.

The vast majority of the literature has treated political debate as largely a matter of conflict among government officials (or aspiring government officials), especially prominent party figures, such as the president and congressional leaders (e.g., Bennett 1990; Entman 2004). And most research suggests that in the rare case when ACGs, such as social movements, do make their way into the news, they are likely to be portrayed in ways that prevent their political messages from being heard (e.g., Wittebols 1996; Entman and Rojecki 1993). As a result, scholars have paid little attention to ACGs in the media.

An emerging line of research, however, argues that there is often considerable opportunity for actors who are not U.S. government elites to appear in the news. These models suggest that professional journalistic norms sometimes encourage media outlets to devote attention to ACGs. For example, ACGs may emerge

as newsworthy when unexpected events occur, or when official proceedings such as government hearings signal the relevance of non-governmental sources (e.g., Lawrence 2000). Recent empirical studies confirm that ACGs do appear in the media in substantial numbers. In particular, non-U.S. elites, such as leaders of foreign countries and officials from international organizations, have been covered frequently during foreign policy debates (e.g., Althaus 2003; Hayes and Guardino 2013).

Yet very little work has attempted to understand systematically when and why ACGs appear in the media. And there has been no sustained effort to elaborate a comprehensive model that organizes the factors that moderate the inclusion and exclusion of ACGs in news coverage of policy debates, particularly in a rapidly changing media environment. In the next section, we use the existing literature to develop such a framework for understanding the conditions under which ACGs make their way into the news.

Theoretical Models: When Do Alternative Cue-Givers Enter Media Coverage?

Three distinct perspectives provide a conceptual basis for specifying the circumstances under which ACGs appear in the news. We label these: (1) *classic indexing*, (2) *balanced power indexing*, and (3) *policy-centric indexing*. We discuss the key features and predictions of each in turn.

We use the term *classic indexing* to refer to the broad outlines of the hypothesis proposed by Lance Bennett and elaborated by him and other scholars (e.g., Bennett 1990, 1996; Zaller and Chiu 1996). This framework focuses on the elite-centric normative order that underpins newsgathering practices and routines in the U.S. mainstream media. Classic indexing proposes that professionally socialized understandings of the proper roles of elected officials and journalists in society enable the government to drive media coverage of policy issues. The basic contours of indexing—in which news coverage is calibrated to the parameters of debate among government elites—have been supported in numerous empirical studies (Lawrence 2000; Bennett et al. 2006; Hayes and Guardino 2013).

Not only will news outlets devote the lion's share of airtime and column inches to the words and actions of (primarily partisan) elites, but they will also take implicit cues from these elite perspectives when allocating coverage to ACGs. Classic indexing suggests that when key elites fail to disagree frequently and publicly, very few ACGs will appear in the news. When these elites disagree, however, not only will that conflict be directly reflected in media coverage, but ACGs will be channeled into the news as journalists perceive institutionalized controversy as a signal that political disagreement is legitimate and “newsworthy.” These ACGs, however, will tend to echo the substantive arguments advanced by prominent Democratic and Republican elites. Thus, the key factors shaping the inclusion of ACGs are the extent, frequency, and intensity of official conflict.

Balanced power indexing, on the other hand, suggests that other professional norms may complicate the way that journalists cover policy debates (Cook 2005; Lawrence 2000). Chief among these are (1) ideological balance, and (2) the importance of predicting the concrete outcomes of policy debates. Most U.S. news outlets have since the early 20th century been committed to presenting “both sides” of major policy debates in roughly equal proportions (Schudson 2003; Cook 2005). Balanced power indexing, therefore, suggests that media outlets will cover most issues in a two-sided fashion, in some cases even if prominent U.S. government officials fail to disagree publicly and frequently. These circumstances will often open the news gates to ACGs who are deemed relevant to unfolding stories.

ACGs' relevance, however, is evaluated not on the basis of the substantive merits of arguments or on principles of ideological or social representativeness. Instead, it is judged by the perceived power of actors to affect the outcome of policy debates. Reporters are keenly interested in “shedding light on future developments” and they use a “rule of anticipated importance” to allocate coverage to various sources (Zaller 1999, 61; see also Entman and Page 1994, 93-94). While this tendency to focus on predicting policy outcomes often leads journalists to gravitate toward the actions and statements of prominent U.S.

elites with formalized access to the levers of institutional power, in some cases it may promote coverage of ACGs, if those voices are deemed sufficiently capable of affecting the resolution of a policy debate. For instance, balanced power indexing would suggest that frequent inclusion of NRA voices in news stories about gun control policy is due to the perceived power of that group to influence legislation (e.g. through lobbying muscle, campaign contributions, and public relations efforts).

Policy-centric indexing suggests that the norms and routines of mainstream journalism might play out differently depending on the substantive nature of policy episodes. Scholars have long argued that foreign policy debates (particularly those related to military action and national security) are more conducive to reliance on official government sources and perspectives than are domestic policy debates. Tight control of information, policy complexity, and elite- and popular-level nationalistic pressures seem to generate more deference to official stances in these cases than in many domestic policy domains (Bennett 1994; Entman 2004, Ch. 1). Therefore, policy-centric indexing suggests that both classic indexing and balanced power indexing operate differently in domestic than in foreign policy cases.¹

Building from these models, our study will provide much-needed conceptual clarity about the factors that lead the media to widen or narrow the range of voices in the news. In addition, our empirical analysis will examine how the inclusion or exclusion of ACGs varies across news outlets in the rapidly changing media landscape. This is particularly important because much of the initial research in the indexing framework was conducted before the rise of cable and online news with their distinctive technical frameworks, economic logics and audience pressures. Because the norms that govern the practice of journalism in traditional and new media sometimes differ significantly (Baum and Groeling 2008; Hayes 2013), we will consider how the appearance of ACGs may vary across print news, network television, cable television, and political blogs. Finally, we will investigate media coverage in a range of issue areas (military intervention, climate change, education policy and same-sex marriage), which will allow us to test the influence of policy domain on the inclusion or exclusion of ACGs.

Part 2: Alternative Cue-Givers and Public Opinion

The second stage of our project develops a framework to explain how alternative cue-givers shape citizens' political attitudes. We argue that the influence of ACGs depends on the interaction between the particular messages from those sources and individuals' underlying substantive predispositions. These effects are likely to be strongest when citizens are not receiving cues from party leaders or when party cues are inconsistent with citizens' predispositions. Our model, which we test in a series of survey-experiments across a variety of issue areas, demonstrates how the availability of messages from ACGs determines the extent to which public opinion will follow or diverge from the positions of partisan elites. Because the news media largely determines the party and ACG messages to which citizens are exposed, our work highlights the underappreciated role of political communication in shaping public opinion on policy issues (see Barabas and Jerit 2009; Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006).

Much recent public opinion research focuses on the influence of party cues. Building on work showing that people look to political leaders for guidance during public policy debates (e.g., Zaller 1992; Brody 1991; Berinsky 2009; Chong and Druckman 2007), numerous studies have demonstrated that when Republican or Democratic leaders adopt a policy stance, their fellow partisans in the public often take the same position (e.g., Baum and Groeling 2010; Cohen 2003; Druckman 2001a; Kam 2005). Endorsement of a policy by a prominent party voice, such as the president, can even lead members of the other party to express opposition, a phenomenon referred to as out-party polarization (e.g., Berinsky 2007; Nicholson 2012). In this *party-driven* model, public opinion is shaped neither by the substance of policy debates nor by the content of Americans' underlying values and beliefs. Instead, simple party heuristics determine

¹ It is important to note that these boundaries between policy areas may be starting to break down with globalization and its widening patterns of international trade and economic activity, health threats, and environmental problems.

citizens' attitudes, which suggests that partisan leaders can virtually dominate public opinion simply by signaling their support of a particular policy position.

Other research, however, emphasizes a *predispositions-driven* model, arguing that pre-existing values, beliefs and perceived interests—that is, people's relatively enduring socio-political orientations (e.g. Feldman and Zaller 1992)—play an important role in shaping responsiveness to elite messages. In his pioneering work, Zaller (1992, 22-28) argues that “domain-specific” predispositions, or values directly related to the policy area in question, play a key part in determining whether people accept or reject elite messages. Values like economic individualism and egalitarianism condition framing effects, for instance, indicating that people's underlying predispositions impose significant limits on the impact of elite political rhetoric (Chong and Druckman 2007; Druckman 2001b; Sniderman and Theriault 2004; see also Kinder and Kam 2010; Hetherington and Weiler 2009). To the extent that partisan identifiers in the mass public receive specific policy messages from their own party's leaders that contravene their existing values, this suggests that many of them will reject those messages. Studies in several issue areas finding that citizens will sometimes reject party cues in ways that appear to be responsive to substantive policy-relevant information support this perspective (Berinsky 2009, 118-123; Bullock 2011; Howell and Kriner 2008; Levendusky and Horowitz 2012; Malhotra and Kuo 2008; Nicholson 2011; Slothuis 2010).

Little work, however, has synthesized and directly tested the predictions of these two models, in part because of inadequate research design. Party-cue experiments have rarely included either (1) individual-level measures of subjects' policy-relevant predispositions or (2) exposure to information from sources other than partisan elites, such as ACGs. As a result, it is often impossible to tell whether the consistency between party elite messages and the opinions of partisans in the public is a product of party endorsements or of the correspondence between those messages and citizens' substantive predispositions.

And while existing experiments have varied the information that subjects have at their disposal (e.g., Bullock 2011; Malhotra and Kuo 2008), the conceptualization of that information environment has been too narrow to capture the way citizens encounter political messages in the real world. In particular, the absence of ACGs in existing research designs means that the extant literature cannot discern precisely how information from sources beyond party leaders may affect citizens' attitudes. This omission of ACGs has led to a critical gap in our understanding of the opinion-formation process.

We propose that exposure to information from ACGs can shape political attitudes when those messages are consistent with individuals' underlying predispositions. In some cases, these messages will weaken the effects of party cues, and can even eliminate such effects altogether. Our focus on the interaction between the substance of the political communication environment and the substance of individuals' underlying values and beliefs, which is a mechanism that is frequently ignored in the cue-taking literature, allows us to reconcile the *party-driven* and *predispositions-driven* models.

Our framework predicts that ACGs are most likely to shape public opinion on policy issues in two situations: (1) when messages from party leaders are absent from the information environment or (2) when messages from party leaders are at odds with their co-partisans' predispositions.

When citizens receive messages from ACGs that are consistent with their predispositions, we expect those messages to influence their policy opinions. This effect should be strongest when messages from an individual's party leaders are *absent* from the information environment. In such circumstances, the ACG message will constitute the primary signal about the policy in question, and thus should be particularly influential for public opinion.

We also expect that ACG messages will influence policy attitudes when party messages are *inconsistent* with an individual's substantive predispositions. In those scenarios, we argue that many citizens will

reject messages from their party leaders in favor of cues from ACGs that resonate with their underlying values and beliefs. This expectation is bolstered by previous findings suggesting that substantive information can weaken the effects of party cues (Bullock 2011; Nicholson 2011; Slothuus 2010).

Finally, we expect that the effect of ACGs on public opinion will be shaped by their *portrayal in the news media*. As we note above, previous studies neglect to adequately model the political information environment. This environment comprises not just different configurations of particular cue-givers and messages, but also their depiction by the news media in relatively favorable or unfavorable ways. Credibility is an important moderator of communication effects, and citizens are unlikely to respond to messengers who are depicted as untrustworthy or as hostile to their interests (Petty, Priester, and Brinol 2002). Thus, when the media denigrate ACGs as frivolous or cast these sources as outside the mainstream of appropriate political discourse (Hallin 1986), their influence is likely to be weaker than when the media do not portray them in this fashion. This is a critical point, because, as we note above, news outlets often depict protest movements and citizen groups in unflattering ways or as illegitimate participants in politics (e.g., Entman and Rojecki 1993). The media also sometimes portray non-U.S. actors negatively, especially leaders who are not friendly to American foreign policy interests (e.g. Dorman and Livingston 1994). Therefore, understanding the conditions under which ACGs might impact public opinion requires that we account for their depiction in the news media.

In sum, our public opinion analysis will enable us to determine the circumstances under which ACGs shape citizens' policy attitudes, including their relative influence as compared to party elite cues, and the extent to which their favorable or unfavorable portrayal in the media may condition effects. Moreover, because our experiments cover a range of issue areas (domestic economic policy, foreign policy and a hybrid environmental issue), we will be able to explore how these opinion-shaping dynamics may vary across policy domains.

Research Design, Part 1: Media Analysis Case Studies

The first component of our research design is a series of four case studies of news coverage during relatively recent policy debates. In each, we will produce detailed content analyses of populations or large random samples of media reports, coding for several elements that allow us to clearly specify conditions under which alternative cue-givers appear in the news. We extend the methodological approach we employed successfully to analyze the debate over the Iraq War (Hayes and Guardino 2010, 2013). Our primary analytic strategy is to compare coverage across cases to evaluate the explanatory power of the theoretical models we discuss above.

Policy Cases

Cases vary along two dimensions. The first is the nature of elite discourse or debate (*hard elite consensus*, *soft elite consensus*, or *elite dissensus*). Hard elite consensus occurs when national elected leaders firmly support a policy stance, and when key actors in both major parties vocally and consistently express the same or very similar positions. Soft elite consensus exists when leaders of one party firmly, consistently and vocally take a position, while key actors in the other party less consistently or less vocally support that stance. Elite dissensus occurs when elected leaders are clearly and sharply divided on an issue. The second dimension is the policy domain (*foreign*, *domestic*, or *hybrid*).

Here, we explain our classification of these cases and our expectations for the specific ACGs that could potentially play a role in these debates:

- Iran Military Intervention (2011-2012): We classify the Iran debate as hard elite consensus. During this period, President Obama said many times that “all options (including military action) are on the table” in dealing with Iran’s nuclear program, and Republican officials’ aggressive

rhetoric toward Iran is well-documented.² We expect foreign elites, including United Nations officials and leaders of foreign countries, to be prominent ACGs. Our previous work has found extensive evidence of the inclusion of foreign elite sources in news coverage of the 2002-2003 Iraq War debate, which is in many ways an analogous policy case (Hayes and Guardino 2013: Ch. 2; Murray 2013).

- Climate Change Policy (2011-2012): We classify the climate change debate during this period as soft elite consensus. While Democrats and Republicans have expressed different stances on climate change, leading party elites did not engage in sharp political conflict with clearly divergent stances on the issue in 2011-2012. Most Republicans have resisted federal legislative action to address climate change, but Democratic members of Congress expressed ambivalence, and Obama did not vigorously advocate action during this time period. We expect scientists, environmentalists, and business interests as potential ACGs. Scientists have technical expertise that might be thought to influence legislation, environmentalists are heavily engaged in climate-related advocacy, and business groups have substantial material stakes in policy outcomes and political and financial resources that might sway government officials.³
- Education Policy (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001): We classify this case as hard elite consensus, as both parties largely agreed on the parameters of the Bush administration's reform plan. The final version of the bill, co-sponsored by liberal icon the late Sen. Edward Kennedy, passed the House of Representatives 381-41 (with 12 abstentions) and the Senate 87-10 (with three abstentions). Potential ACGs include education advocacy groups and teachers unions. Journalists might view these actors as holding power to shape the prospects for legislation (through lobbying, campaign contributions, and other forms of political pressure), and to influence concrete policy implementation.
- Same-Sex Marriage (Federal Marriage Amendment of 2006): We classify the debate over the Federal Marriage Amendment as elite dissensus. The Republican and Democratic parties were clearly divided. On July 18, 2006, the House voted 236-187 in favor of the amendment (it required at least 290 votes to pass); more than 87 percent of Republicans voted for the proposal while more than 79 percent of Democrats voted against it (the Senate did not take a full vote on the measure). We expect religious groups and gay rights organizations to be potential ACGs, given their clear stakes in the outcome of the same-sex marriage debate.

Because this area of research is not yet well-developed, we do not specify precise hypotheses for ACG media coverage: the theoretical formulations are too vague, and the existing empirical research too thin, to make clear predictions. However, the conceptual understandings that we outline here do suggest basic empirical patterns: in general terms, classic indexing would predict a smaller proportion of ACGs than balanced power indexing, while policy-centric indexing suggests that fewer ACGs would appear during foreign or national security policy debates than during domestic policy debates.

Media Outlets

We will analyze content in a variety of media in each case, including broadcast and cable TV, mass-market and prestige newspapers, and online blogs. This will allow us to leverage variation not only in the nature of elite positioning and policy domain, but also in media format. Because of differences in the

² See <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/obama-to-iran-and-israel-as-president-of-the-united-states-i-dont-bluff/253875/> and <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/06/more-iran-war-talk-from-the-senate/>.

³ Media coverage of climate change has drawn substantial research interest in several disciplines during recent years (e.g. Boykoff 2011; Antilla 2005; Feldman et al. 2012), but we are not aware of work that systematically investigates the inclusion of ACGs.

practice of journalism in traditional and newer media outlets (e.g., Baum and Groeling 2008), we expect the presence of ACGs to vary to some degree. This is an especially important possibility in an era in which audiences have far more choice in their news options (Prior 2007).

- Network TV News: We will analyze the entire population of evening network news broadcasts in each case. Despite steady drops in audience, network TV broadcasts remain the primary source of political and public policy news for the largest percentage of Americans (Pew Center 2013). This makes analysis of ABC, CBS, and NBC content crucial in all four policy cases.

We expect that the frequency of ACGs on network news will be very low. Previous scholarship suggests that this is among the most elite-centric news formats (Bennett 2012), and its visual mode and heavily commercial nature are thought to favor simple, dramatic content over substantive policy discourse (e.g., Graber 2009). We also expect the ideological distribution of ACGs to be fairly balanced (Bennett 2012).

- Newspapers: We will analyze large, random samples of coverage in *USA Today* and *The Washington Post*. Newspapers remain the primary source of original reporting in the U.S. media landscape (Bennett 2012; McChesney and Nichols 2010), and despite recent drops in readership, the audience reach and political influence of major papers remains significant (Pew Center 2013).

Following similar logic as that for network news, we expect that *USA Today* will include few ACGs. We predict that ACGs will appear somewhat more frequently in *The Washington Post*. This is because the readership of prestige newspapers is significantly more highly educated and politically engaged than is the readership of mass-market papers, so these news outlets might expect ACGs to draw more consumer interest. In both outlets, we also expect the distribution of ACGs in terms of ideological identity to be fairly balanced.

- Cable TV News: We will analyze large, random samples of coverage on the top three cable networks (Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC). Because of the nature of cable formats, we will divide segments into two categories: (1) headline shows, which feature more straightforward news summaries and traditional reportage segments, and (2) talk shows, which are primarily geared toward news analysis and commentary, often with a heavily slanted and dramatic flair. Analyzing cable content will help us better understand how the shifting and multifaceted media environment of recent years shapes the inclusion or exclusion of ACGs.⁴

We expect to find a higher frequency of ACGs on cable than on either network news or in newspapers. We also expect that ACGs will be polarized in terms of ideological identity. However, we predict that ACGs will appear more frequently on talk shows than on headline news shows, and that polarization of ACGs will be stronger on talk shows than in headline news. Headline shows tend to adhere more strongly to the traditional journalistic norm of objectivity than do talk shows, and cable audiences (especially those for talk shows) are more politically polarized than those of traditional outlets (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Stroud 2011).

⁴ We expect that the volume of cable news coverage will be somewhat lower in the earlier policy cases than in the latter. In particular, cable was a less prominent part of the news media environment during debate over the No Child Left Behind Act than it would become a few years later.

- **Political Blogs:** Finally, we will analyze large, random samples of posts related to each policy issue on two blogs, one liberal (Daily Kos) and one conservative (Hot Air).⁵ We expect to find a very high frequency of ACGs in blog content, because the free-flowing (and sometimes quite informal) nature of blogs encourages presentation of commentary and analysis by those who are not official partisan voices. We also anticipate that ACGs in these forums will be highly polarized by apparent ideological affinity. Previous research on the linking patterns and audience profiles of major political blogs suggests that cue-givers on these sites should also be highly polarized (Lawrence, Sides and Farrell 2010).⁶

Our analysis does not include social media, a much-discussed element of the modern communication landscape. We focus on print, television, and blogs for two primary reasons. First, for all the attention devoted to social media, relatively few people use it for political purposes. Fewer than one in five Americans are on Twitter (Smith and Brenner 2012). And although two-thirds of Americans report using Facebook (Rainie, Smith, and Duggan 2013), just one-third of social media users say that the sites are “very” or “somewhat” important for learning about politics (Rainie and Smith 2012). Second, much of the political content on social media comes directly from news outlets, making it unclear whether Twitter and Facebook should be conceived of as separate news venues. This is not to say that we view the rise of social media as unimportant. But by focusing on print, television, and blogs, we can identify the prevalence of ACGs in the media through which most Americans encounter political information.

Content Analysis Framework

In each policy case, we will code media coverage for several key elements. Our content analysis framework is based on procedures we developed in previous studies. This methodological strategy has exhibited high levels of inter-coder reliability on all key variables. For detailed descriptions of our protocol, see Hayes and Guardino (2010, 2013: Ch. 2, Appendix A). Our previous work illustrates not only the utility of our coding scheme, but also the theoretical promise of our overall approach.

The most important coding category is the identity of individual *source-statements* in the news. We define a source-statement as a discrete thought or assertion related to a policy issue that is attributed to a political actor.⁷ Source-statements may be either direct quotes or indirect paraphrases. They may be attributed to particular actors (e.g., “President Obama, “National Education Association President Bob Chase”), to unnamed but specific sources (e.g., “Human Rights Campaign officials,” “Republican House leaders”) or to non-specific sources (e.g., “U.S. allies,” “climate change skeptics”). This will provide a measure of the frequency with which various ACGs appear in the news.

We will also record the nature of each source-statement by coding its *directional thrust*, or level of favorability toward the policy stance at issue in each case (categorized as “supportive,” “neutral” or “opposed”). In addition to these categories and basic identifying information (e.g., news outlet, date), we will code for the primary and secondary topical focus of each news story, and the directional thrust of each story as a whole (in five categories from “very favorable” to “very unfavorable”).

Our approach—manually coding news texts—differs from some recent work that relies on automated content analysis (e.g., Grimmer and Stewart 2013; Hopkins and King 2010). These tools are valuable for

⁵ Daily Kos and Hot Air are among the most popular political blogs. According to the Blogosphere Authority Index, they constitute the most “centrally linked” sites in the liberal and conservative “blogosphere” (Karpf 2008). In addition, these sites have been identified as representative of ideological blogs in previous work (Hayes 2013, 2014).

⁶ As with cable, blog coverage will likely be much more frequent in the later cases than in the earlier ones.

⁷ For purposes of empirical analysis, we consider journalists, hosts and other media personnel to be “political actors” when they make statements in their own voices that are related to a policy issue. We expect this to be relevant mainly when analyzing cable talk show segments and blog postings.

answering questions that require processing large batches of text, such as speeches, press releases, and in some cases, media stories. But we rely on human coding techniques because they remain the best way to reliably and precisely measure *who says what* in the news. As our previous work demonstrates (Hayes and Guardino 2010, 2011, 2013), manual coding, while labor intensive, can produce the kind of substantively informed and contextually sensitive estimates of the information environment that are necessary in a project of this sort (see also Guardino and Snyder 2012; Hayes 2008, 2010, 2013). Our coding strategy will provide a comprehensive picture of the messages and voices to which news consumers—across various outlets and multiple policy debates—are exposed.

Pilot Data: Proof of Concept

Pilot data suggest that the first stage of our project holds considerable promise. For each policy case, we randomly selected 20 stories from *USA Today*. We then identified and coded every source-statement. This allowed us to determine the frequency with which ACGs appear in the news, whether their prevalence varies across cases, and the particular identities of these ACGs. We examined *USA Today* in this preliminary investigation because it is fairly representative (in terms of substance and depth) of mainstream news about politics, and because we expect it to incorporate fewer ACGs than outlets such as cable networks and blogs. It thus constitutes a “least likely” case for finding large numbers of ACGs.

Nonetheless, ACGs emerged as a significant part of each debate. Table 1 shows that the percentage of source-statements attributed to ACGs ranges from 38% (No Child Left Behind) to 75% (climate change). For a media that is often assumed to rely largely on the perspectives of government and party elites, this is a remarkable level of attention to outside voices. The prevalence of ACGs also varies considerably from case to case, suggesting the need for a theoretical framework that can explain when such voices make their way into the news in greater or lesser numbers. Moreover, the identities of the ACGs seem to reflect journalists’ desire to incorporate the views of actors whom they consider relevant to the outcome of particular debates, suggesting some support for a balanced power indexing perspective. Our proposed study, of course, will utilize much larger sample sizes and a wider range of media outlets to provide firmer evidence on the inclusion and exclusion of ACGs in news coverage of policy debates.

Table 1. Pilot Data: *USA Today* Source-Statement Analysis

	Govt/Party Officials	ACGs	Identities of ACGs
Iran Military Intervention (2011-2012)	51%	49%	Foreign elite voices, U.S. national security experts, think-tanks
Climate Change Policy (2011-2012)	25%	75%	Environmental groups, scientific organizations, business groups
Education Policy (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001)	62%	38%	Education advocacy groups, local school sources
Same-Sex Marriage (Federal Marriage Amendment of 2006)	47%	53%	Gay rights groups, socially conservative groups

Research Design, Part 2: Public Opinion Experiments

In the second phase of the project, we propose a series of survey-experiments to test our expectations about the effects of alternative cue-givers on public opinion. Random assignment to conditions will allow us to specify causal dynamics to a degree that is not possible in observational studies. Like much recent research, we examine the influence of political messages by varying the information to which subjects are exposed. But our experiments improve significantly on existing work in four ways.

First, we explicitly *model the information environment to include or exclude messages from alternative cue-givers*. We have found no experiments that incorporate specific messages from non-party sources. Our study will thus be the first direct experimental test of whether ACGs can shape public opinion.

Second, we *directly measure individuals' policy-relevant predispositions* in pre-exposure surveys. Doing so allows us to examine whether individuals' responsiveness to political messages—from party leaders or ACGs—depends on the resonance of those messages with their substantive values and beliefs. This enables us to determine the extent to which the information environment shapes citizens' propensity to rely on party labels versus their underlying predispositions when forming policy opinions.

Third, we *operationalize our experimental treatments as news stories* constructed to conform to mass-market journalistic conventions of writing style, narrative structure, length, and visual presentation. Much of the existing research has relied on brief vignettes or other simplistic mechanisms for delivering information to subjects. While those approaches have yielded valuable insights, our design more closely approximates the way Americans consume political messages in their daily lives, adding a critical measure of mundane realism and external validity to the experiments.

Fourth, we *focus on three distinct policy areas*: a domestic policy debate over the minimum wage, a foreign policy debate over military intervention in Iran, and the important hybrid issue of climate change that sits at the intersection of domestic and foreign policy. No previous experimental work has sought to determine whether effects on political attitudes (from ACGs or otherwise) are consistent across these domains, which may differ in important ways in terms of both news content and public opinion.

Experimental Design

The experiments, which will be conducted on nationally representative samples through the survey firm YouGov, are designed as follows:

Subjects will first answer a series of questions designed to tap their policy-relevant predispositions. In the minimum wage experiment, we will measure levels of egalitarianism versus individualism, general attitudes that are known to be strongly related to opinion on economic policy (e.g., Feldman and Zaller 1992; Sniderman and Theriault 2004). Participants in the climate change experiment will answer a battery of questions tapping the apparent tradeoffs between economic growth and environmental protection. In the Iran experiment, subjects will answer questions about multilateralism and about force versus diplomacy in American foreign policy, basic attitudes shown to be connected to support for military intervention (e.g., Holsti 2004; Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Page and Bouton 2006). We will also collect data on party identification and various demographic and political characteristics.

Participants will then be randomly assigned to an experimental treatment in which they encounter mock news stories modeled on the online edition of *USA Today*. This is an approach we have used successfully in previous work (e.g., Guardino and Hayes 2013). The articles will vary the messages to which subjects are exposed, both from prominent party elites and relevant ACGs. In order to maximize external validity and speak to policy debates as they occur in the real world, the particular messages from party officials and ACGs will be derived from patterns identified in our media analyses in the first part of the project.⁸

After the treatments, subjects will answer questions gauging their support for the particular policy at issue in each case. We will examine how policy opinions vary depending on exposure to various permutations of party elite and ACG messages—and in particular, the interaction between those messages, on the one

⁸ Our media analyses of the climate change and Iran debates (Part 1) will provide the messages that we use to create treatments for these experiments. For the minimum wage case, we will construct our treatments after an exploratory analysis of relevant news coverage, since that issue is not one that we examine in our systematic content analyses.

hand, and subjects' substantive predispositions and party identification, on the other. We will also test whether media depictions of ACGs as more or less credible condition their effects on public opinion.

Experimental Treatments

We propose four experiments that allow us to determine whether the presence of an ACG message can shape opinion, and whether the effects depend on the substantive content of a simultaneous party cue. These four also allow us to determine whether Democratic and Republican identifiers respond similarly to ACGs, and to ascertain whether ACGs have different effects in domestic versus foreign policy debates. Two additional experiments examine whether the influence of ACGs depends on their portrayal in the media. We describe the experiments below and present the treatments in the accompanying tables (see Appendix A).

Experiments 1 and 2 examine whether information from ACGs influences support for raising the minimum wage. We chose this issue because of the prominence of economic policy debates in recent years. In Experiment 1, we hold the Republican elite cue constant in opposition to raising the minimum wage. We vary the Democratic message (pro, con, no cue) and the presence or absence of a (pro) cue from a left-leaning ACG (an AFL-CIO spokesperson). In Experiment 2, we hold the Democratic elite cue constant in favor of raising the minimum wage and vary the Republican message (pro, con, no cue). We also change the identity of the ACG (a U.S. Chamber of Commerce spokesperson) and the direction of the corresponding cue (con).

Experiment 3 concerns climate change, focusing on a proposal to impose new limits on carbon emissions. Here, we hold the Republican elite cue constant in opposition. We vary the Democratic cue and the presence or absence of a message from a spokesperson for the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

In Experiment 4, we examine the debate over military intervention in Iran. Again, we hold the Republican elite cue constant in support of intervention, vary the Democratic message, and vary the presence or absence of an anti-intervention cue from a United Nations official.⁹

In our final two experiments, we test our source credibility hypothesis, examining whether portrayals of ACGs in the media influence how citizens respond to them. In Experiment 5, we return to the minimum wage. Here, we again vary the Democratic elite cue and hold the Republican cue constant. We hold constant the ACG cue (from a spokesperson for the Occupy Wall Street movement) in favor of raising the minimum wage, but we vary whether the organization is depicted as credible or non-credible. In the credible conditions, the group will be described in neutral terms as a collection of concerned citizens fighting for what they see as economic and social justice. In the non-credible treatments, the news story will portray the group as a foolish, disorganized band of protestors outside the cultural mainstream.

In Experiment 6, we will conduct a similar credibility analysis in the context of foreign policy. In stories about the debate over intervention in Iran, we vary the Democratic elite cue, hold the Republican cue constant, and vary the credibility of the U.N. message (which will be held constant in opposition to military action). In the credible conditions, the United Nations will be portrayed neutrally, described as having the international legal authority to approve or disapprove of military actions. In the non-credible treatments, the organization will be described as traditionally hostile to American sovereignty.

Pilot Data: Proof of Concept

⁹ Our design does not employ a pure control group that is not exposed to any messages. This is because our focus is on the effects of the presence or absence of ACGs, depending on different combinations of partisan cues. In our experiments, then, the first treatment constitutes the baseline condition to which we compare ACG effects.

As with our media analysis, pilot data provide considerable support for our expectations that alternative cue-givers can shape public opinion and suggest that our methodology is an excellent way to test our theoretical framework. In the fall of 2012, we embedded a survey-experiment in George Washington University's module of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study. In the post-election wave, 815 respondents were assigned to one of four treatments in which they were shown a brief vignette about the debate over the Iranian nuclear program. In every treatment, respondents were told that President Obama had said that the military should consider launching air strikes. In the first treatment—in which all sources (two party elites and one ACG) were united in support—the vignette read:

There has been a lot of debate recently about Iran's nuclear program. This month, President Obama suggested that the United States should consider launching air strikes against suspected Iranian weapons facilities. Republican Speaker of the House John Boehner has said he supports the air strikes. Members of the United Nations Security Council also have said they support the air strikes.

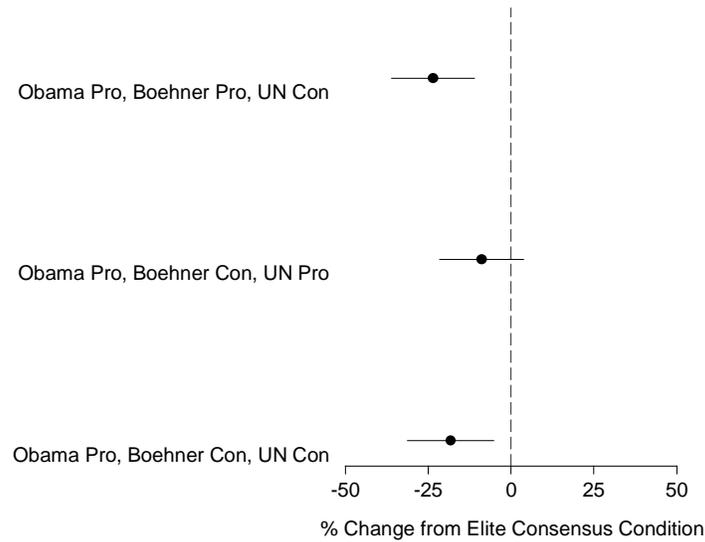
We refer to this as the elite consensus condition. The remaining three treatments held Obama's position constant, but varied whether Boehner and Security Council members—who represent the relevant ACG—supported or opposed military action. In Figure 1 below, we refer to these as “Obama Pro, Boehner Pro, UN Con”; “Obama Pro, Boehner Con, UN Pro”; and “Obama Pro, Boehner Con, UN Con.” After seeing the vignette, respondents were asked whether they supported or opposed air strikes.

The graph presents results for Democrats only—the group that was presented with a counter-predispositional (hawkish) message from a party leader (Obama).¹⁰ The data points represent changes in the percentage of Democrats supporting military action between the elite consensus condition and the treatments in which Boehner or the U.N. (or both) were opposed. It should be noted that the sample size is relatively small, with just 319 individuals represented in the graph.

Despite this small sample, we find strong evidence that Democrats responded to an ACG when presented with a message from Obama that contravened their dovish predispositions. In the top row, Democratic subjects who were told that U.N. Security Council members opposed air strikes were 24 percentage points ($p < .01$) less likely to support military action than were Democrats in the elite consensus condition.

¹⁰ Because of practical constraints, we used party identification as a proxy measure for substantive predispositions in the pilot study. Survey data indicate that Democrats and Republicans have long exhibited clear and significant differences in many values and beliefs that are relevant to this policy case (Hayes and Guardino 2013: Ch. 4; Page and Bouton 2006; Holsti 2004). Partisanship and substantive predispositions, therefore, are empirically related but conceptually distinct.

Figure 1. Pilot Data: Effect of Variations in Elite Support for Air Strikes against Iran, Democratic Respondents Only



The graph shows differences in the percentage of Democrats supporting strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities. Negative scores indicate lower support than in the elite consensus (“Obama Pro, Boehner Pro, UN Pro”) condition. Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals. Subjects were respondents to the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study.

In the second row, the effect of Boehner opposition is about one-third the size of the effect of U.N. opposition, and is not statistically different from zero. In a regression analysis, we find that the effect of U.N. opposition (the first row) is significantly larger ($p < .05$) than the effect of Boehner’s opposition (the second row). This is consistent with the notion that cue-givers must meet some minimum credibility threshold, as Boehner is unlikely to be considered a trusted voice by many Democrats.

That interpretation is supported by the final treatment, in which Democratic support for military action declines by about 19 points ($p < .01$), roughly the same as when only Security Council members were opposed. In addition, the coefficient in a regression analysis for the treatment effect in the bottom row is nearly significantly larger ($p = .11$) than the effect of the coefficient for the treatment represented in the middle row. GOP elite opposition does not amplify Democratic opposition in the mass public, but a cue from a credible ACG does.

These patterns provide evidence for the influence of policy messages from credible alternative cue-givers as they interact with people’s substantive predispositions. If a president—even one basking in the glow of re-election—proposes action at odds with fellow partisans’ underlying values, many of them will reject his proposal when offered a message from an ACG that is more resonant with their predispositions. Of course, our pilot results are only suggestive, especially given the small sample size. But the design of our proposed experiments allows us to address several conceptual and methodological limitations and provide a firm empirical foundation from which to determine how the presence of ACGs in the information environment interacts with people’s substantive predispositions to shape public opinion.

National Security and Economic Implications

This project carries significant potential to advance the national security and economic interests of the United States. It is well known that domestic political support has important implications for the successful development and implementation of foreign policy initiatives, such as efforts to limit nuclear weapons. Systematic evidence on the magnitude, variation, and sources of public opinion—data that our studies of the debate over Iran’s nuclear capabilities will provide—can help political actors develop and promote national security policies that are not only more workable, but which have a stronger foundation

of democratic legitimacy as policymakers seek to balance competing priorities and interests in a complex global landscape.

Our findings regarding the impact of news coverage on public opinion will be similarly relevant to policymaking and implementation in three areas with direct connections to the U.S. economy: climate change, the minimum wage, and education policy. Improved knowledge of media communication and attitude formation during these debates—including how opinion dynamics may differ among policy areas and among different parts of the citizenry—can result in policies with stronger and more informed bases of support from diverse segments of the public. Policies with broad support will be more likely to succeed in boosting America’s standard of living and quality of life, since such policies will face fewer obstacles to implementation. Ultimately, then, the valid and reliable evidence that we generate will help lead to policy decisions on a range of crucial issues that better represent public values and interests, while promoting America’s security, economic performance, and moral standing in the world.

Plan of Work

<i>July 2014-August 2014</i>	We will develop our content analysis protocol, train research assistants, and carry out several rounds of practice coding to ensure high levels of reliability in the media analysis. We will also compile a comprehensive database of relevant news coverage from print, TV, and blogs for our four policy cases.
<i>September 2014-December 2014</i>	We will conduct and complete the content analysis for our first two policy cases, Iran and climate change.
<i>January 2015-April 2015</i>	We will conduct and complete the content analysis for our second two policy cases, education and same-sex marriage. We will also begin preliminary analysis of the Iran and climate change data.
<i>May 2015-September 2015</i>	Informed by the preliminary findings from the content analysis, we will finalize the design of our survey- experiments. This will include writing the news stories that serve as treatments, as well as pilot-testing our questions on convenience samples. We will also work with YouGov to develop and program the survey instrument and obtain IRB approval.
<i>October 2015</i>	The survey experiments will be fielded over the course of several days. Once the surveys are completed, YouGov will provide us with the data within a few days.
<i>November 2015-January 2016</i>	We will continue and complete our comparative analyses of the media case studies. We plan to finish a paper based on these results that will be presented at the April meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association in Chicago. We will also begin analysis of the survey experiments.
<i>February 2016-June 2016</i>	We will complete the analysis of the survey-experiments, which will be reported in a paper to be presented at the September meeting of the American Political Science Association. The project will formally terminate in June, but we expect to revise and submit papers to appropriate journals by the fall of 2016. Ultimately, we anticipate that the project will produce two peer-reviewed articles and a book

manuscript on the role of alternative cue-givers in U.S. news coverage and public opinion.

January 2017

We will make the media content analysis and experimental data available on our personal web sites and through the data archive hosted by the George Washington University library (DSpace@GW).

Appendix A

Experiment 1: Minimum Wage Increase, Left-Leaning ACG

	Democratic Cue	Republican Cue	ACG Cue (AFL-CIO)
Treatment 1	Pro	Con	No cue
Treatment 2	Pro	Con	Pro
Treatment 3	Con	Con	No cue
Treatment 4	Con	Con	Pro
Treatment 5	No cue	Con	No cue
Treatment 6	No cue	Con	Pro

Experiment 2: Minimum Wage Increase, Right-Leaning ACG

	Democratic Cue	Republican Cue	ACG Cue (Chamber of Commerce)
Treatment 1	Pro	Con	No cue
Treatment 2	Pro	Con	Con
Treatment 3	Pro	Pro	No cue
Treatment 4	Pro	Pro	Con
Treatment 5	Pro	No cue	No cue
Treatment 6	Pro	No cue	Con

Experiment 3: Climate Change Policy

	Democratic Cue	Republican Cue	ACG Cue (United Nations IPCC)
Treatment 1	Pro	Con	No cue
Treatment 2	Pro	Con	Pro
Treatment 3	Con	Con	No cue
Treatment 4	Con	Con	Pro
Treatment 5	No cue	Con	No cue
Treatment 6	No cue	Con	Pro

Experiment 4: Iran Military Intervention

	Democratic Cue	Republican Cue	ACG Cue (United Nations)
Treatment 1	Pro	Pro	No cue
Treatment 2	Pro	Pro	Con
Treatment 3	Con	Pro	No cue
Treatment 4	Con	Pro	Con
Treatment 5	No cue	Pro	No cue
Treatment 6	No cue	Pro	Con

Experiment 5: Credibility: Minimum Wage Increase

	Democratic Cue	Republican Cue	ACG Cue (Occupy Wall St.)
Treatment 1	Pro	Con	Pro (non-credible portrayal)
Treatment 2	Pro	Con	Pro (credible portrayal)
Treatment 3	Con	Con	Pro (non-credible portrayal)
Treatment 4	Con	Con	Pro (credible portrayal)
Treatment 5	No cue	Con	Pro (non-credible portrayal)
Treatment 6	No cue	Con	Pro (credible portrayal)

Experiment 6: Credibility: Iran Military Intervention

	Democratic Cue	Republican Cue	ACG Cue (United Nations)
Treatment 1	Pro	Pro	Con (non-credible portrayal)
Treatment 2	Pro	Pro	Con (credible portrayal)
Treatment 3	Con	Pro	Con (non-credible portrayal)
Treatment 4	Con	Pro	Con (credible portrayal)
Treatment 5	No cue	Pro	Con (non-credible portrayal)
Treatment 6	No cue	Pro	Con (credible portrayal)