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Conservationism is not Conservatism: Do Interest Group Endorsements Help Voters Hold Representatives Accountable?

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## **“Conservationism is not Conservatism: Do Interest Group Endorsements Help Voters Hold Representatives Accountable?”**

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### *Abstract*

*Much research assumes that voters know or can learn the positions their representatives take on key issue. Arthur Lupia found that voters could learn such information through advertisements and interest group endorsements. We examine whether these cues improve voters’ ability to infer their representative’s voting behavior and find that most interest groups fail to do so. In a follow-up study, we find that voters are ignorant of which positions the interest groups take on issues. Finally, we run a similar experiment for representatives’ party affiliation and find that it is similarly uninformative; voters are unclear on where the parties stand on issues as well.*

### **Introduction**

Democratic accountability hinges on voters’ ability to reward and punish their representatives. However, voters’ ability to hold their elected officials accountable for their actions may fall apart in at least three ways: voters may fail to track their representatives’ actions; they may fail to form a judgment about those actions in line with their own beliefs or interests; or they may fail to act on those judgments by not participating in the electoral process. A wealth of literature has demonstrated that voters often exhibit all three of these failings. In a study of 1988 California ballot initiatives on the topic of insurance reform, Arthur Lupia (1994) claimed that low-information voters used knowledge of insurance industry preferences to emulate high-information voters, reflecting a widely held notion that interest group cues may help voters make better-

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1 This is a memorandum summarizing the current progress of a research project coauthored by David Broockman (University of California, Berkeley), Gabriel Lenz (University of California, Berkeley), and myself.

2 The author would like to thank the Institute of Governmental Studies, Bill and Patricia Brandt, and the Charles Percy Grant for Public Affairs Research for their generous contributions in support of this research project. For invaluable editorial insights, he would also like to thank Robert Ward.

informed decisions. In this paper, we will begin to fill a major gap in this literature by examining whether voters can use similar interest group cues to infer the roll-call voting behavior of their members of congress. Such a finding would bring optimism to a subject ruled by notions of voter ignorance.

One of the best-documented findings in political science is how poorly informed the public is regarding politics (Converse 1975; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Many claim that cognitive heuristics such as partisan identification are critical to a voter's ability to make inferences about for which candidate they should vote. However, the evidence in support of such heuristics' efficacy is scarce. The strongest claim in favor of heuristics suggests that they allow uninformed voters to strongly emulate their well-informed peers (Lupia 1994). Such heuristics include political party (Snyder & Ting 2002), group identities (Brady & Sniderman 1985), public mood (Rahn 2000), and advocacy group endorsements (Gimpel 1998, Arceneaux and Kolodny 2009). Voters may also rely on a handful of issues important to them individually, helping to minimize cognitive effort (Krosnick 1990). These heuristics are of widely varying effectiveness, and each has a different impact on high-knowledge voters versus their less informed peers. Each may be misused or manipulated, and voters often lack the information necessary to use heuristics at all (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000).

In this paper we present the results of a series of survey experiments designed to measure the effectiveness of interest group endorsements at informing voters of their representatives' voting behavior in Congress. We motivate our study with an experiment showing that respondents cannot identify their representatives' voting behavior when presented with relevant interest group endorsements, their members' party identification,

or a combination of both. To explain these findings, we present results from a follow-up experiment in which we show that voters know very little about the policy positions of some of the largest and biggest-spending interest groups, even when provided with policy cues.

In the following section, we describe our survey experiments, followed by our prior expectations and hypotheses. In the results section, we detail our key findings regarding the use of the general ineffectiveness of interest group endorsements and party identification cues followed by a finding about heterogeneity in interest group effectiveness. We then discuss several robustness checks before concluding with a discussion of our work's implications for democratic accountability and several avenues of future research.

### **Survey Design & Methodology**

We conducted an experiment using 1200 respondents recruited through Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk in March and April 2013 to examine party identification and endorsements cues and their effects on respondents' accuracy at inferring Congressional votes. In the control condition, we asked respondents to provide their *best guess* about their representative's vote on one of seven issues: "Please give your best guess for the question below: Did [respondent's representative] vote for [policy text]?" The first treatment condition exposed respondents to their representative's party identification: "Did [respondent's representative] vote for [policy text]? Before you answer this question, here's some information you might find relevant: Your representative is a member of the [party] Party." The second treatment condition exposed

respondents to four statements of special interest group (see Table 1) ratings in place of the party cue. The cues varied little by interest group, and generally took the form of “Representative [Rep.] received a score of [x]% from the [Interest Group].” The third treatment condition presented respondents with both interest group ratings statements and their representative’s party identification.

Table 1: Issue areas, interest groups, house votes, question wording, and vote breakdown<sup>3</sup>

Issue	Interest Group	Vote	Did your representative support...?	Dems in favor	Reps in favor
<b>Abortion</b>	NARAL Pro-Choice America	HV 292 2011	“banning federal funding for elective abortions”	8.3%	97.5%
<b>Energy</b>	Chamber of Commerce, League of Conservation Voters	HV 650 2011	“constructing the new Keystone XL oil pipeline”	24.4%	96.7%
<b>Trade</b>	AFL-CIO	HV 283 2011	“the free trade agreement with Korea”	30.7%	90.5%
<b>Environment</b>	League of Conservation Voters	HV 249 2011	“prohibiting the federal Environmental Protection Agency from regulating greenhouse gases”	9.9%	97.9%
<b>Guns</b>	NRA	HV 842 2011	“allowing concealed carry of firearms across state lines”	21.9%	94.6%
<b>Healthcare</b>	Chamber of Commerce	HV 14 2011	“repeal universal healthcare”	1.6%	100%
<b>Women’s health</b>	Federally Employed Women	HV 271 2011	“banning deferral funding for planned parenthood”	5.2%	95.9%
<b>Arts</b>	Americans for the Arts	HV 192 2011	“banning federal funding for National Public Radio (NPR)”	0%	94.6%
<b>Security, Civil Rights</b>	National Journal, ACLU	HV 66 2011	“a 90 day extension of the Patriot Act”	35.2%	87.6%
<b>Taxes</b>	Club for Growth	HV 659 2013	“a tax increase on individuals with \$400,000 or more in income to avert the fiscal cliff”	90.1%	35.3%

<sup>3</sup> This experiment used only the first six issues. For the energy issue, the interest group presented was the League of Conservation Voters; the Chamber of Commerce we presented with the healthcare issue.

We also asked a standard knowledge battery and ideological placement questions before concluding with a series of demographic questions such as gender, race, education, income, and group membership. Respondents had the opportunity to self-identify as members of a broad range of groups including a trade union, an advocacy group, a parent-teacher association, and a neighborhood watch.

It is important to note that our analysis necessarily excluded those respondents whose representatives were elected after 2011 when the key votes we examine were cast. Overall, fewer than one in four respondents had representatives elected that entered office after 2011. Since respondents likely know more about longer-serving incumbents than freshman representatives, this should bias our results in favor of finding an effect of heuristics on accurate inference. Secondly, several representatives did not receive endorsements from various interest groups for whatever reason. We tested for this prior to random assignment to experimental conditions, and limited these respondents to the control or party identification conditions. We do not expect this to bias our results in any direction.

### **Heuristics Experiment Results**

Do special interest group endorsements improve respondents' accuracy? To answer this question, we divided respondents in our second experiment into three treatment groups and one control. One treatment group we provided with interest group ratings, one group we provided with party ID, and the third group we provided with both. If interest group statements provide usable cues, then the average accuracy in the treatment group that received only endorsement statements should be higher than the

control group, and average accuracy among those in the joint cue condition should be more accurate than those receiving only party ID. However, this is not what we find. Table 2 below shows the percent of respondents in each condition that correctly identified how their representative voted. There is no statistically significant difference between the control group and the endorsement only group (column 1), nor is there one between the party ID group and the joint cue group.

**Table 2: Can respondents infer how their representatives vote using heuristics?**

Condition	Total Average	Low Knowledge	High Knowledge	Member	Not a Member	N
<b>Control</b>	61.9% (2.8%)	52.1% (3.9%)	74.8% (3.9%)	63.0% (6.6%)	51.6% (3.2%)	294
<b>Party ID</b>	70.7%** (2.5%)	65.4%** (3.5%)	77.6% (3.5%)	57.7% (6.9%)	65.8%*** (2.8%)	336
<b>Endorsements</b>	60.3% (3.9%)	48.9% (5.4%)	75.0% (5.3%)	69.7% (8.1%)	57.7% (4.5%)	156
<b>Party+Endorse</b>	71.4%** (3.4%)	69.5%*** (4.3%)	75.0% (5.5%)	70.3%* (7.6%)	71.7%*** (3.8%)	182

Standard errors in parentheses; Asterisks indicate significance of difference from the control condition  
 \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

It is possible, however, that interest group endorsements are not equally useful to all voters. For example, Lau and Redlawsk (2001) find that only respondents with a high level of political sophistication can effectively use heuristics, while they may be detrimental to politically uninformed respondents. If this is the case, we would expect to find a substantial positive effect of endorsement cues on high-knowledge voters partially counteracted by a negative effect on low-knowledge voters. In fact, we find very little evidence to support that hypothesis. As columns 2 and 3 in Table 2 show, the various treatment conditions have no effect on high-knowledge voters at all. One explanation might be a ceiling effect: high-knowledge voters are already so knowledgeable about their representatives' behavior that the treatment has no impact. However, their accuracy

in the control condition is barely three-quarters, indicating substantial room for improvement. Low-knowledge, on the other hand, voters use the party identification heuristic quite effectively, boosting accuracy from 52% to 65%. The effect for the endorsement condition is statistically insignificant, though in the opposite direction as expected.

It is also possible that interest group endorsements are only effective among voters who are familiar with parsing them. Perhaps only voters who are themselves members of an interest group and are accustomed to receiving information from them can use such cues. If so, we would expect to find an effect of the endorsement condition on those respondents who self-identified as belonging to such a group. Columns 4 and 5 in Table 2 show this analysis. We again find that the endorsement condition has no effect: Members and non-members in the endorsement group have similar but statistically insignificant differences from those in the control group. Furthermore, the party identification cue only has an effect on non-members. This is not an artifact of a correlation between membership and political sophistication: the two have a correlation coefficient of 0.087.

### **Interest Group Heterogeneity**

An important wrinkle in this finding is that there is substantial heterogeneity among interest groups. This makes intuitive sense: Some interest groups are larger than others and constitute a larger presence in the national media; furthermore, some interest groups were especially salient over the time period in which the survey was run. For example, the National Rifle Association enjoyed substantial news coverage due to the recently increased salience of the gun control debate in the aftermath of any number of



recent mass shootings. Additionally, some groups spent much more money during the most recent election cycle than others. We might expect that those groups which spend the most money would also be the most effective at informing voters since their names and issue positions would be more salient. The six interest groups in our analysis represent a diverse set of spending strategies<sup>4</sup>: The Chamber of Commerce is among the highest-spending organizations, almost all of which consists of “outside spending” by a group independent of the campaign itself, while the AFL-CIO, another of the heavy hitters of campaign contributions, primarily make direct contributions to candidates’ campaigns. The former spent almost \$40 million during the 2012 election cycle, while the latter spent just over \$30 million. NARAL, on the other hand, spent only \$2.5 million, most of which is in outside expenditures. The National Rifle Association and the League of Conservation Voters, despite their clout, lie in the middle of our list at around \$22 million and \$18 million, respectively.

In Table 3 below, we show respondents’ accuracy by treatment condition and interest group. Of the six issues below, gun control and abortion are the only issues for which interest group endorsements boost accuracy. The environmental cue, given by the League of Conservation Voters, and the trade cue, given by the AFL-CIO, both had large *negative* effects on accuracy.

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<sup>4</sup> Our expenditures data come from OpenSecrets.org

**Table 3: For which interest groups were endorsement cues most effective?**

Condition	NARAL	LCV(1)	NRA	AFL-CIO	LCV(2)	COC	N
<b>Control</b>	59.4% (8.8%)	55.2% (9.4%)	67.6% (8.1%)	52.4% (11.2%)	65.5% (9.0%)	63.4% (5.8%)	216
<b>Party ID</b>	77.1%* (7.2%)	66.7% (8.0%)	58.6% (9.3%)	50.0% (10.4%)	70.8% (6.6%)	82.3%** (4.3%)	251
<b>Endorsements</b>	84.2%** (8.6%)	36.4%* (8.5%)	83.9%* (6.7%)	26.7%* (11.8%)	60.0% (11.2%)	61.2% (7.9%)	156
<b>Party+Endorse</b>	75.0% (9.9%)	61.1% (8.2%)	80.0%* (7.4%)	56.0% (10.1%)	57.7% (9.9%)	88.9%** (4.7%)	182
<b>N</b>	106	134	124	85	123	233	805

Standard errors in parentheses; Asterisks indicate significance of difference from the control condition  
 \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

### Heterogeneity Explained

To explain this heterogeneity, we carried out an experiment using 4000 respondents from California recruited by Survey Sampling International<sup>5</sup>. In the first condition, we asked respondents to identify the position an interest group took on the relating item of legislation (Table 4a). To each respondent we presented three interest groups and the following prompt: “Did [group] support [policy text]?” For most groups, respondents correctly identify their positions about 40% of the time. However, respondents were much more accurate for both NARAL Pro-Choice America and the National Rifle Association. One explanation is that we presented NARAL as “NARAL Pro-Choice America”, a more informative name than “Club for Growth”. However, we cannot use this same logic to explain the effects of the NRA.

<sup>5</sup> We varied slightly the interest group and issues used for this follow-up. Instead of the civil rights issue tied to the Patriot Act and the ACLU, we used a tax issue tied to a debt ceiling vote and the Club for Growth.

**Table 4a: About which interest groups are respondents most informed?<sup>67</sup>**

	NARAL	COC	NRA	AFL- CIO	CFG	LCV
<b>Correct</b>	462	396	762	246	204	240
<b>Incorrect</b>	360	456	438	462	402	408
<b>Don't Know</b>	1440	1368	978	1674	1434	1536
<b>C/(C+I)</b>	56.2%	46.5%	63.5%	34.7%	33.7 %	37.0%

It is plausible that respondents are confused by issue questions but would be capable of identifying an interest group's rough ideological position. To test this hypothesis, we asked a different set of respondents from the same sample to rate interest groups each on a seven-point ideology scale. We presented three interest groups each and prompted "We would like you to rate the following special interest groups from liberal to conservative. Where would you place [interest group] on this scale?" As the first row of Table 4b shows, there is little evidence that respondents are capable of placing groups on the ideological spectrum with the usual exceptions of NARAL and the NRA. All other groups are clustered around 4, the midpoint of the spectrum.

Perhaps respondents do not consciously know the rough ideological placements of the interest groups, but would be able to infer such if prompted with the general issue positions the interest groups take. To test this, we embedded an experiment in the survey using the ideology scale placements as a control group. Under the treatment condition, we presented an issue area cue, for example: "Where would you place the Chamber of Commerce, a pro-business organization, on this scale?" If respondents require issue position cueing to correctly place interest groups on an ideology scale, we can expect that

<sup>6</sup>We asked about the League of Conservation Voters (LCV) in 2 contexts: EPA regulation (1) and the Keystone XL pipeline (2). Their combined accuracy is statistically indistinguishable from their individual accuracies.

<sup>7</sup> COC = Chamber of Commerce. CFG = Club for Growth.

respondents in the treatment condition would on average rate the interest groups closer to their ideal point than those respondents in the control condition. The third row of Table 4b presents Adam Bonica’s (2012) ideal point estimates for the interest groups. In fact, we find mixed evidence: Prompting respondents with an issue position cue moves average ratings in the correct direction, though only for the Chamber of Commerce and the League of Conservation Voters is the effect significant. However, the treatment as a whole has a strongly significant affect across issues (Table 3c).

**Table 4b: About which interest groups are respondents most informed?<sup>8</sup>**

Condition	NARAL	COC	NRA	AFL-CIO	CFG	LCV
<b>Ideology - Control</b>	2.56 (0.11)	4.03 (0.14)	4.95 (0.17)	3.38 (0.12)	3.89 (0.11)	4.02 (0.11)
<b>Ideology - Treatment</b>	2.49 (0.14)	4.61 (0.13)	4.92 (0.19)	3.25 (0.16)	3.99 (0.12)	3.25 (0.12)
<b>CF Score<sup>9</sup></b>	1.77	4.88	4.78	2.55	5.60	2.67
<b>Average Treatment Effect</b>	0.07	0.58***	0.03	0.13	0.10	0.77***

Standard errors in parentheses; Asterisks indicate significance of difference from the control condition  
 \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

**Table 4c: About which interest groups are respondents most informed?<sup>10,11</sup>**

Variable	Accuracy
<b>Condition</b>	0.264*** (0.0563)
<b>Constant</b>	1.414*** (0.0404)
<b>N</b>	1828

<sup>8</sup> Interest groups are rated on a 7 point scale where 1 is Extremely Liberal and 7 is Extremely Conservative. For liberal groups (NARAL, AFL-CIO, LCV), a decline from control to treatment indicates learning. For conservative groups, an increase from control to treatment indicates learning.

<sup>9</sup> As a comparison, we scaled Adam Bonica’s interest group ideal point estimates to our seven-point scale (Bonica 2012).

<sup>10</sup> This regression table shows the effect of the treatment on issues aggregated. We measured correctness as ideological extremeness, and measured the effect of the condition on placing the interest group further from 4, the middle of the ideology scale, in the correct direction. We also clustered by respondent.

<sup>11</sup> The effect of the treatment was more significant (p<.01) for low-knowledge than high-knowledge (p<.05) respondents.

Robust standard errors in parentheses  
 \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Figure 1: Interest Group Ratings Histograms – Control Condition

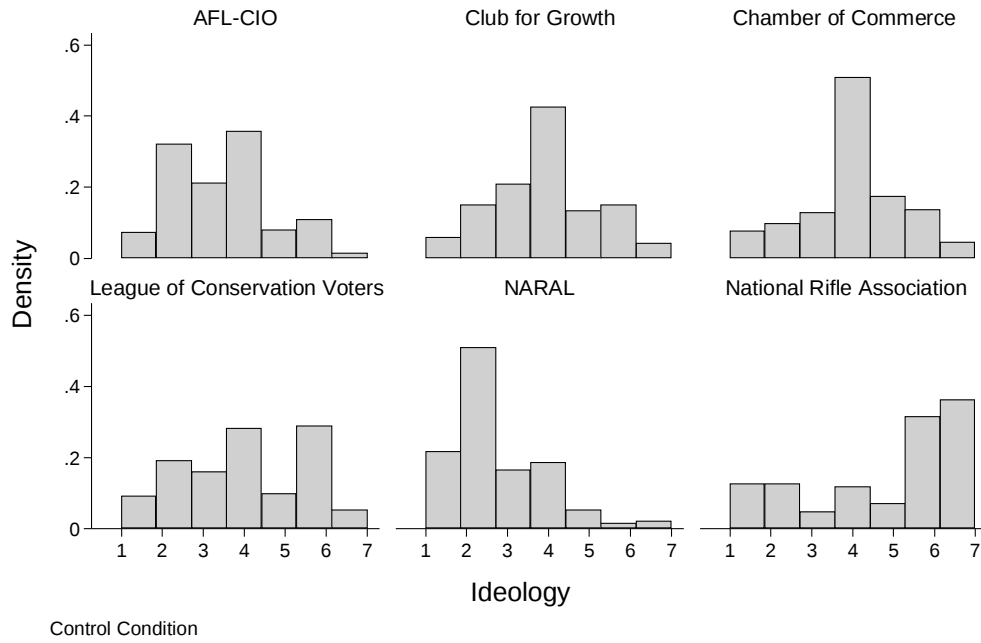
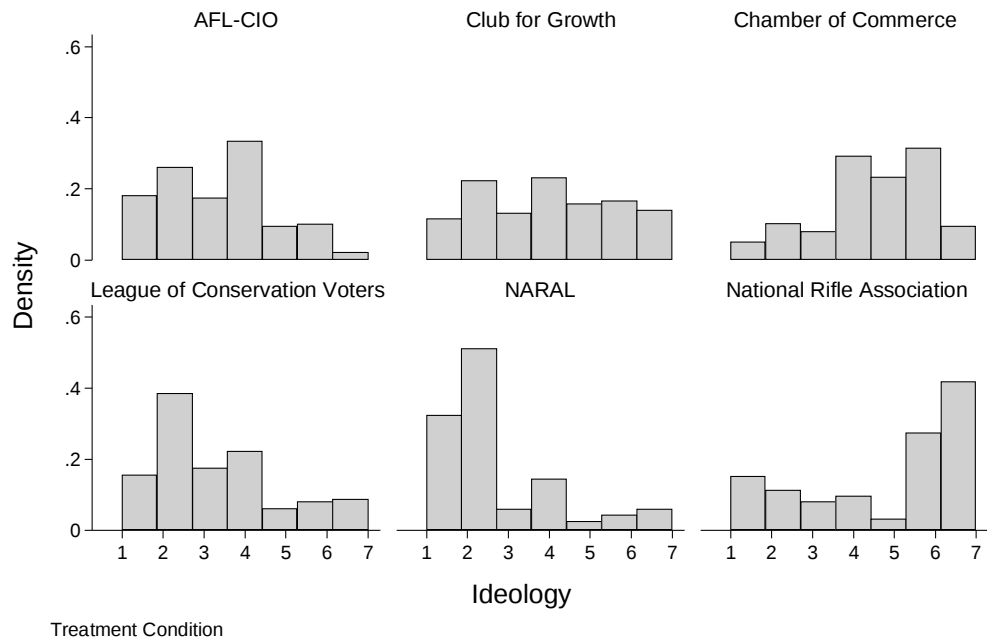


Figure 2: Interest Group Ratings Histograms – Treatment Condition



Several findings from Table 4b are particularly worth noting. The most informative interest groups from Table 3, NARAL and NRA, also have the smallest average treatment effects under the interest group ratings experiment, likely because voters are not learning any additional information from the treatment cues. The League of Conservation Voters has an average ideology score in the middle of the scale despite its very liberal ideal point; respondents found the LCV the least informative of all the interest groups. In the ideology ratings experiment, they also enjoy the largest average treatment effect, indicating that most respondents do not know that the League of Conservation Voters is a pro-environmental organization. Histograms of all groups' ideology ratings for both control and treatment conditions are in Figures 1 and 2.

### **Why Are Interest Group Endorsements Ineffective?**

One explanation for respondents' general failure to utilize endorsement cues is that they do not acknowledge a tension between their own impressions of their

representative, positive or negative, and a positive or negative endorsement cue. If this is true, then respondents receiving a negative cue will not reevaluate their impressions downward. To test for this, we ran a multivariate linear regression in which we modeled respondents' approval of their representatives as a function of the whether the respondent identifies as a member of the opposite party as his or her representative interacted with the treatment condition. If respondents are taking endorsement cues into consideration, the coefficient for the endorsement interaction term will be statistically significant. Instead, we find that the only significant coefficient is that of non-co-partisanship (Table 4), suggesting that respondents do not consider endorsement cues in stating whether they approve of their representative.

**Table 5: Do cues affect public approval of representatives?**

Variable	Approval	Interacted with co-Partisanship
<b>Party</b>	0.140 (0.104)	0.002 63 (0.153)
<b>Endorsement</b>	-0.00170 (0.125)	0.180 (0.196)
<b>Party + Endorsement</b>	-0.136 (0.124)	0.127 (0.182)
<b>Different Party</b>	1.004*** (0.113)	
<b>Constant</b>	2.395*** (0.0752)	
<b>N</b>	872	

Standard errors in parentheses  
\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

## **Democratic Accountability & Future Research**

We know that candidates actively seek interest group endorsements<sup>12</sup>, yet our research indicates that their endorsements have little direct impact on voters' knowledge or net impressions of representatives' behavior. Furthermore, special interest groups are legally forbade from advertising their endorsements of candidates or issues. The only ways they may disseminate their information is directly to members or to members of the media via "press lists", which may explain why only the most salient groups improve respondents' accuracy at identifying representatives' issue positions. This suggests that candidates seek those endorsements for reasons other than their informativeness. One reason is that interest group endorsements likely deliver votes from their members. Under this argument, an interest group's decision to endorse a candidate directly affects its members' propensities to vote for the endorsed candidate even controlling for policy predispositions. For example, a member of the National Rifle Association might be more likely to vote for a pro-gun candidate simply because of the NRA's endorsement, even though the candidate held pro-gun policy positions prior to the endorsement. Another argument is that interest group endorsements are often accompanied by campaign

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12 Even a cursory review of candidates' websites indicates that they consider interest group and individual endorsements to be politically significant, as they often occupy prominent locations. Many candidate websites include links to endorse the candidate, allowing anyone to endorse whomever they please. See, for example, Wendy Greuel's 2013 Los Angeles Mayor website, <http://www.wendygreuel.org/>.



contributions. The causal evidence surrounding the effects of campaign funding and vote share is thoroughly mixed (Gerber 1998).

Our findings also bear importance for current policy debates. California SB 52 2013 is known as the California DISCLOSE Act. If passed, it would require all political advertisements to prominently feature the names of the three individuals or organizations that provided the most money to produce the ad. The underlying assumption is that viewers will note the funding organizations and use them to make more informed decisions regarding whether or not to accept the ad at face value. Our findings suggest that most voters are not sophisticated enough to incorporate such information reliably. Only the most politically knowledgeable voters are likely to know the political leanings of individuals or interest groups who finance such advertisements<sup>13</sup>.

Many works of public policy rest on a number of assumptions about voters' electoral capabilities, despite a growing wealth of literature proving those assumptions to be shaky at best. Our results confirm long-standing pessimism toward voters' abilities to hold their representatives accountable. As we have also shown, interest group endorsements are not informative to them. There are many cognitive steps a voter must make in between receiving an endorsement and altering or confirming an opinion regarding a candidate, and many different paths to get there. One possible path is through ideology: An interest group endorses a candidate, a voter associates the interest group with an ideology, and then considers or disregards the endorsement dependent on co-ideology. If voters traverse this cognitive path, then explicitly associating an interest group with an ideology ("...the Chamber of Commerce, a conservative pro-business

<sup>13</sup> Lupia (1994) shows that voters *can* incorporate such information when the interest groups in question are insurance corporations. Since then, corporations have stopped funding advertisements in their own name and now channel their funds through political action committees to avoid the risk Lupia outlined.

advocacy group,...”) should improve accuracy. Future survey experiments will examine this cue. Another line of inquiry might examine which heuristics *decrease* accuracy. Perhaps voters presented with candidate pictures would attach policy preferences similar to their own to the candidate they find most attractive; there is strong evidence to suggest that candidate attractiveness can have a substantial impact on vote choice among the least politically knowledgeable (Lenz & Lawson 2011).

One socially beneficial goal of political science is to improve the extent to which voters can hold their representatives accountable, of which improving voters’ knowledge is only one part. Such research can provide prescriptive remedies to voter ignorance: more informative voter guides or ballots, or challenger campaigns capable of informing voters about their incumbent’s poor performance, may very well lead to representatives who are more responsive to their median voter. The field of political representation is developing rapidly: such results may not be far off.

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## **Appendix A: External Validity**

One may wonder if our survey experiments lack external validity; after all, surveys cannot capture the entire range of political contexts in the real world. According to the issue publics literature, many voters have a small handful of issues which dictate their vote. One voter, for example, might be a 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment voter and always favor the candidate who espouses more lax gun regulation. We may be underestimating our

respondents' abilities to look up votes if they simply lack interest in the issue we ask them to look up. Outside of a laboratory setting, individuals would look up their representatives' votes only on the issues they care about most. To test this, we embedded a second experiment in both surveys.

Prior to eliciting guesses about representatives' policy positions in both surveys, we randomly assigned a portion of both the treatment group(s) and the control group to choose a policy issue most important to them personally. We then asked the respondents to either look up or guess their representative's positions on the issue they selected based on their overall control or treatment status. If the issue publics assumptions are true, we should expect those assigned to the choice condition to be much more accurate than those randomly assigned to an issue they do not care about.

In fact, we find no support for the issue publics prediction. In Table 6 below, we see that in the first experiment, those we randomly assigned to an issue were no more accurate than those respondents who were given a choice. The difference between the two, 0.5%, is not statistically significant.

**Table 6: Are people more accurate when they look up the policy that interests them most?**

Condition	Raw	Guess Corrected 1	Guess Corrected 2
<b>Random</b>	67.4% (2.1%)	34.8% (4.2%)	51.1% (3.1%)
<b>Choose</b>	67.9% (2.1%)	35.8% (4.2%)	51.9% (3.1%)
<b>Difference</b>	0.5%	1.0%	.8%

A second claim against our experiment's external validity arises from our respondent pool, a convenience sample of Mechanical Turk users (MTurkers). MTurkers are disproportionately adept at internet-related tasks. Thus, the treatment effect measured through respondents who are especially good at internet research might overestimate the average voter's ability to look up facts about their legislators. Therefore, while our treatment effect is not a reliable measure of how voters might respond to our treatment, this overestimation strengthens our claim that voters are poor consumers of political information. Regardless, we ran an experiment similar to our MTurk study using a representative sample to validate our results.

To this effect, we carried out an experiment using 4000 respondents from California recruited by Survey Sampling International<sup>14</sup>. In the control condition, we asked respondents how their representative voted on an issue: “Did US Representative Nancy Pelosi...” In the treatment condition we included the representative’s party: “Did Democratic US Representative Nancy Pelosi...” The results from this experiment (Table 7a), and suggest that party identification by itself is only a modestly useful cue regarding representatives’ voting behavior. Furthermore, it is equally useful for both high and low knowledge respondents.

**Table 7a: How Well Does the Party Identification Heuristic Work?**<sup>15</sup>

Condition	Raw SSI	SSI - Guess Corrected	High Knowledge	Low Knowledge
<b>Control</b>	54.1% (1.2%)	8.2% (2.4%)	64.8% (1.9%)	48.3% (1.5%)
<b>Party</b>	57.6% (1.3%)	15.2% (2.6%)	67.9% (1.9%)	52.0% (1.6%)

14 We varied slightly the interest group and issues used for this follow-up. Instead of the civil rights issue tied to the Patriot Act and the ACLU, we used a tax issue tied to a debt ceiling vote and the Club for Growth.

15 We only used the guess correction that omitted “abstain” as a possible choice.

<b>Difference</b>	2.5%	7%	3.1%	3.7%
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**Table 7b: How Well Does the Party Identification Heuristic Work?**<sup>16</sup>

Variable	Accuracy
<b>Condition</b>	0.0343* (0.0175)
<b>Constant</b>	0.541*** (0.0123)
<b>N</b>	1578

A final claim is that using a knowledge scale is a poor way to measure political sophistication. Instead of breaking down the effectiveness of heuristics by knowledge in Table 2, a more externally valid measure is whether respondents could identify their representative’s party. That analysis is in Table 8 below. The substantive results are the same as the knowledge scale.

**Table 8: Which combination of heuristics works best?**

Condition	Total Average	Knew Rep’s Party	Incorrect Rep’s Party	N
<b>Control</b>	61.9% (2.8%)	69.0% (5.2%)	46.8% (3.3%)	294
<b>Party ID</b>	70.7%** (2.5%)	72.1% (10.0%)	53.8%* (2.6%)	336
<b>Endorsements</b>	60.3% (3.9%)	66.0% (7.1%)	48.0% (4.6%)	156
<b>Party+Endorse</b>	71.4%** (3.4%)	75.6% (11.4%)	33.4%** (3.4%)	182

Standard errors in parentheses; Asterisks indicate significance of difference from the control condition  
 \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

## Appendix B: Incentives Experiment

### Incentives Experiment Methodology

In order to measure voters’ capacity to identify their representatives’ votes; we conducted an initial survey using approximately 1200 respondents recruited from

<sup>16</sup> Table 7b is a regression table listing the significance of the difference in Table 7a Column 1.

Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk in October 2012. In the control condition, we asked respondents to provide their *best guess* about their representative's vote on one of nine issues. In the treatment condition, we offered them an additional \$1 to correctly *look up* their representative's vote on one policy using the internet given only two minutes. Among the treatment group, we further randomly assigned whether the respondent could choose which issue to look up; we discuss this experimental condition in a following section.

We drew our nine policies from a list of high-profile votes during the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress. To select the nine, we chose votes that were diverse in the extent to which the vote count was split along party lines, the expected guessing difficulty, and the expected lookup difficulty. We placed the votes in a three-dimensional array illustrating our prior expectations about which issues respondents would be able to guess or look up most accurately. For example, we placed a vote to defund Planned Parenthood as a party line vote that is both easy to guess and easy to look up; similarly, we expected the temporary extension of the Patriot Act to be easy to guess and difficult to look up given the way Democrats split during the vote. The nine votes we used were: repealing the Affordable Care Act, defunding Planned Parenthood, banning federal healthcare spending used for abortions, creating a national standard for carrying concealed firearms, defunding National Public Radio, authorizing the Keystone XL oil pipeline, authorizing a trade agreement with South Korea, banning the Environmental Protection Agency from regulating greenhouse gases, and reauthorizing the Patriot Act. See the Appendix for our a priori placements.



To ascertain respondents' ideas about their representatives' positions, we asked simply if their member of Congress supported the policy. We also included later in the survey a knowledge battery of five questions, questions about placing themselves and their representative on a seven-point ideology spectrum, and a question about identifying their representative's party identification. One tenth of the respondents to whom we assigned the lookup condition we further asked where they found the answer; this question served to ensure there was no single source of information from which all respondents found their answers.

### **Incentives Experiment Expectations & Hypotheses**

We designed our first study to measure respondents' accuracy at identifying representatives' policy positions when incentivized to do so. Given the means, opportunity, and incentive, we expect respondents to be able to accurately look up those positions almost 100% of the time. We had no expectations regarding the accuracy of the respondents who simply guessed, though we were not optimistic. We further expect to see that those respondents who can correctly identify their representative's party identification to be more accurate under both the treatment and the control conditions since it party ID is such a dominant heuristic. Substantial scholarship suggests that only the knowledgeable can properly use such heuristics as party ID; if this is true, we expect to find that among those who know their representative's party ID, only those with high knowledge scores are more accurate in guessing policy positions. If this theory is false, however, we should likely find that knowing party ID has a substantial positive effect on accuracy among all knowledge levels. This would imply that using the party ID heuristic

requires minimal foundational information, pointing to it as an effective heuristic for informing the voting public and promoting democratic accountability. If respondents knew both party identification and how the parties voted on an issue, they would be correct 91% of the time based on the total percentage of votes cast along party lines for our selected roll call votes. Our results show, then, that many respondents who know party identification do not also know party positions, a key to correctly inferring votes.

### **Incentives Experiment Results**

Can respondents identify the votes their representatives cast in Congress? To answer this question, we employed a compound treatment. We asked the control group to provide their best guess; to the treatment group we offered pay and allowed two minutes to research the question on the internet. Respondents could select "Yes," "No," and "Abstain." In Table 5, we provide the results. While less than 60% of our respondents correctly guessed their representative's vote, more than three-quarters correctly did so when provided with means and incentive. However, to correct for those respondents who guess correctly due to luck, we apply two different standard guess corrections.<sup>17</sup> The treatment effect of 16.2% suggests that when unincentivized, voters, whose baseline

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<sup>17</sup> To correct for respondents who guessed correctly due to luck, we followed a method outlined by Robert Luskin, introduced to us by John Bullock: ([http://bullock.research.yale.edu/papers/elite/elite\\_appendix.pdf](http://bullock.research.yale.edu/papers/elite/elite_appendix.pdf)). Fewer than 1% of all roll call votes cast are abstentions, but respondents selected that option about 5% of the time. As such, the first guess correction omits the "Abstain" option in its calculations of incorrect choices; the second column includes it.

(control) accuracy would not earn them a passing grade, have the capacity to achieve solid Cs.

Analogies aside, is this performance good? As a comparison, we might expect that respondents in attempting to identify their representative's votes might utilize the party identification heuristic. In doing so, they would be incorrect only to the extent that their representative voted differently from the rest of their party. Had respondents used that heuristic, they would have been correct 91% of the time, 15% better than our treatment group. In other words, our treatment effect of monetary incentive and facilitation via internet was *half as effective* as a hypothetical treatment of providing respondents with their representative's party identification and informing them which position their representative's party took on their issue. In the last column of Table 1, respondents who knew their representative's party identification were over 5% more accurate than those who did not, but still far short of an "A" grade.

The treatment condition specified two minutes of research time, but maybe sufficient research takes more time. We enforced a 2 minute time limit and recorded the length of time spent on the lookup page, but only a handful of respondents took the full 2 minutes. There is no relationship between the length of time respondents took to look up their answer and their accuracy; accuracy instead peaks around the median of time spend.

**Table 5: Can people identify their representatives' votes?<sup>18</sup>**

Condition	Raw	Guess Corrected 1	Guess Corrected 2	Knew members'
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<sup>18</sup>The first guess correction omits "abstain" as a possible choice; the second does not. Percentages with standard errors in are parentheses. Guess corrected standard errors are calculated as the standard errors of the upper and lower bounds of the raw score, and thus do not scale linearly.

				pid
<b>Know w/o pay</b>	59.5% (2.2%)	19.0% (4.4%)	39.3% (3.3%)	66.3% (2.4%)
<b>Lookup w/ pay</b>	75.7% (1.9%)	51.4% (3.8%)	63.6% (2.8%)	81.5% (1.8%)
<b>Difference</b>	16.2%	32.4%	24.3%	15.2%

What information makes voters the most accurate? Which heuristics, when supplied, help the average voter make the choice most aligned with her own policy preferences at high levels of accuracy? Perhaps party identification is enough, and the treatment effect represents only those respondents who learned their representative's party during the lookup period and nothing more. To check for this, we ran an identical analysis among only those respondents who already knew their representative's party identification. The results are in the last column of Table 5. Among these respondents, the treatment effect was essentially the same. Under the guess condition, 66.3% of respondents who knew their representative's party answered correctly, while 81.5% did so under the lookup condition. This difference of 15.2% is statistically indistinguishable from the 16.2% difference between the treatment and control groups for all respondents. These experimental results bear similarity to estimates by Lau and Redlawsk (1997), in which they show that three-quarters of the voting public in 1992 voted in line with their preferences. This suggests that a small part of the treatment effect is learning party identification. It further indicates that knowing party identification is not enough to correctly infer a representative's voting behavior: It may be that voters must also know which position each party took to properly use the party identification heuristic.

Another way of viewing the average treatment effect is that it represents respondents' revealed preferences regarding how much money it is worth to them to learn

their representatives' policy stances. In the treatment condition, we explicitly offer respondents \$1 to correctly identify how their representative voted. Thus, the average treatment effect represents the percentage of the treatment group to whom \$1 plus political information was worth the maximum of two minutes we allotted them to look up the required facts. The subjects, Mechanical Turk workers, were already being paid *less than \$1* to complete the entire survey, which took five minutes on average to complete. Since we can therefore assume that respondents would have considered the \$1 worth the two minutes, subjects in the treatment group who incorrectly answered the question either received incorrect information or considered the political information of negative value to them.

### **Lookup Sources**

Why did the respondents who were given research time and a pay incentive perform better than those in the control on average? What strategies did the respondents use? We asked 10% of the respondents in the lookup condition to identify where they found the information they used. Of the 50 respondents in this category, 11 cited Google or a similar search engine. 17 cited nonpartisan websites that compile information on legislative voting patterns including VoteSmart.org or OnTheIssues.org. Another 11 cited partisan sources, either their representative's directory on the House website or a partisan advocacy group. 7 claimed prior knowledge, and the rest cited relevant news articles. One respondent who made use of his prior knowledge made an explicit inference from Democratic party identification to support for funding for National Public Radio (he was correct). There is also substantial overlap between those who cited Google and those

who cited any other internet source. Significantly, the first results for any search combining a Congress member's name and a policy issue consist of pages from both nonpartisan sources as well as the member's House.gov profile. The small sample size of 50 precludes any rigorous analysis of the above data, but it is significant that those who cited prior knowledge or nonpartisan sources performed substantially better than those who cited either a search engine or a partisan source. Most web addresses cited by respondents besides the generic search engines contained the vote information we requested. Those that did not contained information about the representative's position on the policy without mentioning the vote, a short inference away. However, even those respondents whose sources contained the correct information often failed to provide it. Of course, even the most optimistic researcher would not expect perfection, but it makes intuitive sense that those nonpartisan sources with the clearest presentation of relevant information and the goal of informing voters improve accuracy the most.