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Divide and Conquer: Examining the Effects of Conflict Rhetoric on Political Support

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**Divide and Conquer:
Examining the Effects of Conflict Rhetoric on Political Support**

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Katharine Sara Gomez
August 2018

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Michael. You knew what I was getting into and you never doubted for a second that I would succeed. I love you.

And to my children, Henry and Grace, for cheering me on and not complaining too much that I was busy.

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And last, to my parents, thank you for doing everything in your power to help me succeed. I would not be where I am today without you.

ABSTRACT

Partisan-based conflict rhetoric has grown more important in political strategy over time and is very often focused on delineating the differences between the parties. But, political messaging frequently involves targeting different social groups or non-political entities as responsible for social problems rather than political parties and opponents. Blame as a rhetorical strategy involves appeals to group identities other than those based upon partisanship. The brilliance of a blame strategy is that the group membership of the audience at which the blame appeal is directed need not be explicitly defined. Much of the research studying the various forms of conflict rhetoric (i.e. attack advertising) focuses on the partisan tensions inherent in these messages, but only limited literature can shed light on how the public feels about or responds to politicians blaming non-political groups. Through two original experiments reported in three articles, dissertation attempts to fill this gap by exploring the parameters and effects of *strategically placed blame* on various dimensions of political support. It seeks to answer the degree to which political and policy goals are facilitated or impeded by this divisive form of rhetoric.

Each article approached this question within the framework of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978, Tajfel & Turner, 1986). As suggested by social identity theory, politicians can use conflict rhetoric to maximize the perceived differences between their *in-group* and the *out-group*, thus stimulating favoritism with the *in-group* through the perceived threat from the *out-group*. By examining the different effects of variations in blame, these articles offer an overview of whether and when politicians may benefit from attacking the opposing party, attacking a non-political group, or refraining from an attack. The results indicate that blaming an opposing party offers more harm than good. Blaming a non-political group can be effective at manipulating

perceptions of the attacked group as well as raising demand for punitive policies. No blame messages elicit positive reactions that are beneficial to political parties, but arouse emotions that both help and harm measures of democratic support.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Importance of Studying Conflict Rhetoric

Whether used on the campaign trail, in the policy arena, or for the benefit of media dissemination, rhetoric is a strategic and integral component of politics. Rhetoric is a tool through which politicians align themselves with the precepts of an ideology and political party and argue for their preferred policy initiatives. With rhetoric politicians and parties attempt to differentiate themselves from each other to convince citizens they are more deserving of political support than the competition. Emphasizing group conflict is particularly useful for politicians and parties to create distance between themselves and the opposition. Because focusing on conflict can heighten awareness of social group differences, it can create a sense of threat to group status (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), cultivating anger, fear and frustration between groups. In such an atmosphere, group identity and winning overcomes thoughtful deliberation (Miller & Conover, 2015; Mason, 2015) decreasing the chances of accommodation and compromise.

Giving prominence to conflict in political rhetoric is not new to American politics. Even the vitriolic and exceedingly nasty attacks that seem today to be new are not unique, as people who lived through the turbulent political era of the 1960s will attest (Shea & Fiorina, 2013). A common concern today, however, is that political rhetoric is more negative and less civil than in the past. Research tracking increasing campaign negativity over time (Franklin-Fowler, Ridout & Franz, 2016; Fowler & Ridout, 2012) and studying the prevalence and implications of vitriolic policy debate (Grimmer, 2013) supports this consensus. With this uptick scholars have expressed increasing unease about its effect on our political system (e.g. Galston, 2013). This worry is reflected in the public sphere as well, as Table 1.1¹, outlining the increasing number of

¹ Table 1.1 and all subsequent tables can be found in Appendix A.

news articles devoted to the tone of political rhetoric, illustrates.

The main premise of this dissertation is that conflict rhetoric is a regularly relied upon political tool used with the intention of activating different social identities in the electorate to sow anger and anxiety toward out-groups and reap in-group support. The literature studying the different forms of conflict rhetoric is extensive, yet whether the impact is deleterious or beneficial remains an open question (e.g. Aldrich, 2013; Geer 2006; Lau, Sigelman & Rovner, 2007). As such, continued study of the effects of conflict rhetoric on the electorate is vital to understanding the extent to which the public is manipulated by politicians' public relations efforts and what this means for democratic processes and outcomes. The seeming increase in uncivil exchanges coupled with alarming trends like decreasing support for free speech and democracy among millennials (Routledge, 2017; Poushter, 2015), suggest that there are less than desirable consequences to the current atmosphere of open political hostility, and is the focus of this research.

Negative and Ubiquitous: Conflict Rhetoric in Politics

Negative discourse in politics is often blamed on the media's focus on conflict and drama. The newsroom maxim *if it bleeds, it leads* illustrates the commercialization that drives news organizations' inclination to focus on "conflict, dissension and battle" (Schudson, 2011, p. 44) at the expense of positive stories. As Schudson (2011) notes, "out of a journalistic convention that there are two sides to any story, news heightens the appearance of conflict even in instances of relative calm" (p.44). The purpose of shock and awe in news media coverage is to attract audiences. This deliberate focus on controversial events maintains and intensifies conflict between groups, creating a "political spectacle" for the entertainment of the audience (Edelman, 1988). Indeed, news is triggered by adverse events and political actors can increase

the likelihood of receiving media attention by adapting their language to this negative form of communication. The explosion of communications experts employed in politics indicates that government officials recognize and seek to exploit this media logic (Landerer, 2013).

That the media treats political conflict like a rubbernecker passing a traffic accident is not surprising, given what psychology tells us about fear response and risk aversion impulses that lead people to focus more on negative than positive information (Lau, 1985). Termed negativity bias, this instinct causes people to spend more time and effort evaluating negative information (Allen & Burrell, 2002; Kanouse & Hanson, 1972; Lau, 1985). This may be beneficial to politicians because greater evaluative processing efforts can increase message persuasion (Hilbig, 2012; Petty & Brinol, 2008; Tormala, Brinol, & Petty, 2007). Research on negative campaign advertising indicates that politicians can use this communicative form of rubbernecking to manipulate the information voters consider when making decisions (Druckman, Kifer & Parkin, 2009). The subsequent increase in processing efforts due to the negativity bias should enhance the persuasiveness of a negative message. Since people view negative messages as more illuminating, informative and truthful than positive messages (Ahluwalia, 2002; Herr, Karges & Kim, 1991; Hilbig, 2009), it follows that a strategically communicated negative message may do more to rally political support or promote action than positive messages.

While campaign strategists and politicians believe negative campaigning works (Fridkin & Kenney, 2008), research studying the effects of negative political advertising is mixed. Negative campaign advertisements have been found to contain more information about candidates' policy positions than positive self-promoting ads (Geer, 2006), and may increase citizen interest in politics (Brooks & Geer, 2007) and stimulate knowledge (Lau et al., 2007). This may be due to campaign negativity increasing as candidates make their policy positions

clear (Hassell & Oeltjenbruns, 2013). Additionally, in markets with higher concentrations of negative advertising activity people are more likely to be politically active (Hopp & Vargo, 2016). Researchers, however, agree that going negative in a campaign can backfire and, therefore, is a risky strategy that should be used with caution (Damore, 2002; Dowling & Wichovsky, 2015; Hale, Fox & Farmer, 1996; Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Peterson & Djupe, 2005; Theilmann & Wilhite, 1998). The immediate boost from negative ads diminishes over time and continued attacks can create a backlash effect (Banda & Windett, 2016). Uncivil attacks, often termed mudslinging, can be particularly damaging for the message sender (Fridkin & Kenney, 2004), offsetting any harm to the target of the attack.

Beyond attempts to depress opponent's evaluations, politicians use political messaging to rally support among base constituents (Fenno, 1978). It is likely that politicians who engage in conflict rhetoric are doing so for the benefit of their strongest supporters. By focusing on conflict, politicians signal ideological and political divides between the parties. Perceiving this polarization likely makes people more partisan (Lupu, 2014), arguably a goal of political messaging. Research indicates that exposure to negative campaign advertising and partisan rhetoric can lead to increased attitude polarization (Meffert, Chung, Joiner, Waks, & Garst, 2006; Garramone, Atkin, Pinkleton, & Cole, 1990) and partisan intensity in the electorate (Morris & Witting, 2001; Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes, 2012; Lupu, 2014). Furthermore, under polarized conditions, people are more likely to adhere to partisan biases and discount strong but incongruous arguments (Taber & Lodge, 2006; Druckman, Peterson & Slothuus, 2013), indicating that negative attacks on the opposition are much more likely to reaffirm and strengthen the opinions of partisans than to sway people with opposing opinions.

The downside of this is that negative attacks may also push opposing opinions even farther away. Social judgment theory suggests that changes in opinion, including the direction of change, is a function of the individual's initial stance and the stance of the new communication (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). The degree and direction of persuasion is determined by the distance between a person's already held opinion and the viewpoint expressed in the message. In practice this means that when an opinion is not far from that expressed in the new message, it is possible to bring that opinion in closer alignment with the message. However, if an opinion starts out far from the new message, the likely result is that the opinion will be pushed to an even further extreme. Studies of motivated reasoning indicate that sophisticated voters, and those with strongly held opinions, are the least likely to be swayed by opposing arguments due to disconfirmation bias and the tendency to argue against incongruent information (Taber & Lodge, 2006; Meffert et al., 2006; Biek, Wood & Chaiken, 1996; Chaiken, Liberman & Eagly, 1989). As such, conflict rhetoric likely strengthens the opinions of the opposition as well as co-partisans, perhaps cancelling any beneficial effect. With primary campaigns seemingly used as political orthodoxy tests (Boatright, 2013), the likelihood of a candidate's position being relatively close to an opposition voter's during the general election is decreasing and any discussion of cross-party appeal may be for naught.

Relying on attack messages to increase support may also be a risky strategy because it can result in indirect harm to both parties through decreasing support for factors important to a healthy democracy. Negative campaign ads may demobilize voters (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995), although other research disputes this finding (e.g. Finkel & Geer, 1998; Lau et al., 2007). There is, however, evidence that negative advertising decreases feelings of efficacy (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Lau et al., 2007), which likely impacts voter turnout and faith in

democratic processes. Research also indicates that campaign negativity decreases trust in government (Lau et al., 2007), which has been steadily declining since the late 1950's (Pew, 2017), as instances of campaign negativity have increased. Likewise, increased party conflict, often exhibited through political rhetoric, is linked to decreased confidence in and support for Congress (Harbridge & Malhotra, 2011; Ramirez, 2009; Morris & Witting, 2001). With negative advertising, negative political reporting and negatively focused opinion programming, contemporary politicians appear submerged in uncivil discourse and, in the aggregate, citizens don't seem to like such partisan behavior (Ramirez, 2009; Harbridge & Malhotra, 2011; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995). It does not appear that engaging in conflict rhetoric is likely to increase confidence or trust in the government. It may even actively harm its legitimacy.

In the policy arena, research indicates that Senators under little political cross-pressure from constituents are more likely to be ideologically extreme in their views and to engage in partisan position-taking and negativity (Grimmer, 2013). Further, because they more often engage in position-taking, these Senators tend to dominate policy debate. As a result, ideologically extreme views expressed through vitriolic rhetoric may have more influence on policy debate than more moderate views (Grimmer, 2013). Wolf, Strachan and Shea (2012) found that strong partisans are more likely to be mobilized by negativity even if they believe incivility to be detrimental to democracy. Couple this with the decreasing prevalence of cross-pressured districts (Fleisher & Bond, 2004) and it appears that members of Congress are electorally incentivized to adopt extreme positions and engage in combative rhetoric. The uncompromising partisanship now detected in the electorate likely motivates politicians to engage in uncivil rhetoric (Wolf, Strachan, & Shea, 2012). But, this likely results in the under

representation or absence of representation in Congressional debate of citizens whose opinions do not adhere to extreme positions.

Because the electorate clearly perceives the increases in party polarization (Aldrich, 2013), as demonstrated through party cues in conflict rhetoric, voters can better align their own preferences and cast the “right” vote (i.e. voting for the party with aligned issue positions; Levendusky, 2010; Hetherington, 2001). That parties are divided on a wider range of high and low salience issues than has historically been the norm may be leading to more coherent attitudes in the mass public (Layman & Carsey, 2002). If the decline in split-ticket voting (Stonecash, 2006) or the more consistent sorting of partisans into ideological camps (Aldrich, 2013) is any indication, voters are more reliably voting for the party with which they align ideologically. Additionally, research looking at data through 2008 indicates that markers of satisfaction with government improved as political rhetoric devolved (Aldrich, 2013). Perceptions that public officials care what the public thinks and that the government listens to the people increased over time, while a majority of people reported being satisfied with democracy. More recent research, however, detects declining support for democracy and democratic values in the U.S. and other countries (e.g. Foa & Mounk, 2017).

It is important to note that the disparities in these findings appear to coincide with the increasing dominance of social media in communication. During the 2008 presidential campaign, social media emerged as important campaign media (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). The 2016 campaign may be proof that social media can be leveraged by a savvy user to overcome lack of relevant experience, knowledge and skills to reach and influence voters. Recent survey research conducted by Pew Research Centers indicates that a majority of people now get at least some news from social media sites (Bialik & Matsa, 2017). With the rise of

mass communications utilizing digital technologies, or *new media*, we find new iterations of conflict rhetoric such as memes shared across social networks and real-time twitter feuds between politicians and other public figures. As has been noted by some in the news media (e.g. Edsall, 2017), and in the academic literature (e.g. Galston, 2013), the tone of political discourse appears to have reached an unprecedented level of incivility that is outside the bounds of what has traditionally been considered acceptable.

Diana Mutz (2013) argues that visual representations of political conflict have altered the way people react to incivility and may be contributing to the rubbernecking tendency of televised politics. The brevity and anonymity of much social media interaction is especially suited for harsh criticism and vitriolic attacks (Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts & Barberá, 2017), as is indicated with incidents of online trolling and cyberbullying. That civility seemingly has decreased as modes of news consumption and other communications have changed suggests that the evolution of media may be impacting social norms. As Esser (2013) argues, with this evolution, the journalistic norms that drive media coverage decisions may institutionalize beyond the traditional media realm to define appropriate rules of behavior. It is possible that the evolution of media is contributing to a greater acceptance of uncivil discourse. Research has begun to explore the use and prevalence of incivility in online communication formats (e.g. Borah, 2014; Hopp & Vargo, 2016), but its effects remain unclear.

This review of the literature demonstrates that the impact of combative and negative rhetoric is far from settled. That politicians continue to engage in conflict rhetoric despite the public's dislike of this behavior (Geer, 2006; Bartels, 2000), indicates that they think it works. The research suggests, however, that "going negative" is not always a path to victory for political actors and may also have detrimental effects for democratic outcomes. Although it may be

debatable whether political rhetoric is nastier than it used to be, the contradictory findings discussed here indicate that we still have much to learn about whether and how negative-toned rhetoric can benefit political interests and the long-term effects it has on democracy.

Pin the Tail on the Target: Blaming as a Political Tool

The term *conflict rhetoric* is used here to encompass political rhetoric employed with the intention of highlighting differences between, and creating opposition to, people, groups or ideas. A major assumption in this research is that this rhetorical strategy, often accomplished through attacks and denigration of out-group members, is purposively used by political actors to activate group allegiance among message receivers to bolster political support. Conflict rhetoric manifests in political discourse in a variety of forms, including negative campaign advertising, partisan rhetoric, outrage discourse, and blame. This dissertation focuses on the use of blame as a political tool and its effect on political support.

Blame is an especially useful rhetorical strategy because it allows politicians and political parties to deflect fault for policy failures and rally support for their own policy proposals. Government officials are motivated to avoid the negative repercussions of policy failures because, as predicted by negativity bias, failures draw more attention than success (Hood, 2010). Research indicates that voters are more likely to punish politicians for failure than reward them for success (Hood, 2010; Borraz, 2007; James & John, 2007). This is because “voters are more sensitive to what has been done *to* them than what has been done *for* them” (italics in original; Weaver, 1986, p. 373).

Politicians often engage in a preemptive form of blaming, whereby one party will ring the alarm for potentially hazardous outcomes of proposed policy. Akin to Jerit’s (2009) conceptualization of predictive appeals, the purpose of this type of attack is to depress the

favorability of a proposed policy by highlighting associated risks. As Lau, Smith and Fiske (1991) note, policy advocates expend significant time and energy on the development of rhetorical arguments about the potential consequences of policy proposals (Jerit, 2009). While Jerit (2009) does not explicitly conceptualize predictive appeals to encompass blaming, the implication exists in her description of the policy interpretation and rebuttal process in which opposing policy actors engage:

Thus, elites who seek to reduce support for a legislative proposal may make drastic predictions about the negative consequences of the bill. Supporters of a proposal might forecast grand benefits as a way of generating support, or they may make dire claims about what will happen in the *absence* of change. William Riker came to a similar conclusion nearly two decades ago when he made this observation about rhetoric in policy debates: “campaigners on each side emphasize the dreadful consequences of the failure (or success) of the motion they advocate (or oppose)” (p. 412, Riker, 1990, p. 58).

Emphasizing the possible negative consequences of an opponent’s policy proposal implicitly includes placing blame on the opponent should their policy be implemented and the dire consequences come to pass.

The infamous example of this is the “Daisy Spot” 1964 presidential campaign advertisement run by President Johnson’s campaign (LBJ Library, 2012). The advertisement implied that not voting for President Johnson was a vote for Barry Goldwater and foreign policy that will lead to nuclear war and dead children. While the “Daisy” ad may be extreme, this alarmist form of blaming is common in policy debate and in campaign advertising when parties and political candidates attack each other’s policy stances. Beyond lowering confidence in the opposing party’s policy positions, an implication of such an attack is that the attacking party is

better suited to deal with the issue. With negative affect for the opposing party, potentially comes positive affect for the attacking party, because the purpose of attacks is to lower estimation of the opponent while also raising the comparative estimation of the attacker (Benoit, 2007).

Another form of blaming rarely addressed in the literature is when politicians and political parties attack different groups to assign blame for social issues. For example, during the 2016 presidential election cycle, Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT) blamed big banks for much of the economic and societal woes in the U.S. (McAuliff, 2015), while Republican candidate Donald Trump targeted Mexicans and Muslims (Deggins, 2015; Healy & Barbaro 2016). Likewise, Governor Chris Christie (R-NJ) blamed universities for unmanageable student loan debt (Haddon, 2015). Such messages identify for constituents an out-group at which to direct anger, fear, and frustration over policy problems. Blame rhetoric can create political opportunity and help politicians avoid risk by manipulating citizens' perceptions of different social groups (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). By choosing to lay blame for social problems on others, politicians link problem definition to a target group and justify the use of certain policy tools. With blame, politicians create credit-taking opportunities to prescribe solutions for social ills and to act against those causing the problem.

The list of possible targets for blame is long and includes people and entities in and outside of government (Hood 2010). Research has explored whether differences in message sender (i.e. a candidate versus an outside group; e.g. Dowling & Wichowsky, 2015) and type or degree of negativity (i.e. trait-based versus policy-based or civil versus uncivil; e.g. Fridkin & Kenney, 2008; Brooks & Geer, 2007) impacts the effectiveness of a negative message. The literature, however, has yet to investigate the disparate impact of politicians purposively blaming

different groups. Therefore, this dissertation focuses on blaming as an aspect of political communication. Through two original experiments reported in three articles, this study explores the parameters and effects of *strategically placed blame* on various dimensions of political support. It also seeks to measure the degree to which political and policy goals are facilitated or impeded by this divisive form of rhetoric.

Organization of the Dissertation

The results of the research for this dissertation are presented in three independent articles, each examining the impact of strategically placed blame on specific dimensions of political support. Chapter two describes the overarching theoretical framework for the three articles, an explanation of each dimension of political support measured and the intervening, control, and demographic variables included. Chapters three, four, and five comprise the articles, *Negative Gains: How Attack Messages Impact Partisan Identity and Party Reputation*, *You've Got to Accentuate the Negative: Mediatization, Group Conflict and Building Policy Support*, and *Unintended Consequences: Why Attack Rhetoric May Be Bad for Democracy*, respectively. Chapter six concludes with a summary of the findings from all three articles and a discussion explaining the implications, interconnections, and contributions these articles make to the literature. Included in this chapter is a brief discussion of the limitations posed by the study design and suggestions for future research. All references, tables, and figures are reserved for the end of the dissertation.

Article Summaries

Chapter three reports the result of research investigating the role conflict rhetoric plays in stimulating feelings of partisan intensity and altering assessments of the aligned and opposing parties. This research seeks to answer whether, as suggested by social identity theory (Tajfel &

Turner, 1986), politicians benefit from messages that create and sustain a sense of conflict between the parties. Specifically, this study examines whether the target of blame matters to the dependent variable political support, measured as partisan identity and party reputation. The results indicate that blame messages do influence strength of partisan identity and estimation, but not in the expected direction and with different outcomes for the two parties. In some instances, targeting an opposing party diminished political support, while the absence of a blame target increased it. Blaming a non-political group did not result in significant different effects compared to the other conditions.

In Chapter four, I present a framework within which to understand the influence of the media on political rhetoric and the ramifications for public policy. More specifically, this research attempts to explain how the changing media landscape has impacted the communicative behavior of political elites. As suggested by mediatization theory (Esser & Stromback, 2014), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and social construction theory (Schneider & Ingram, 1997), the media's most important impact on the political system is indirect through its effect on elite rhetoric and this effect can be traced all the way through the political process to policy outcome. While this paper presents an explanation for the effect of the media and conflict rhetoric on the entire public policy process, statistical analysis was limited to the effect of blaming as it can impact support for public policy. The success of blaming as a strategy to raise policy support, however, is likely mediated by perceptions of message credibility. This research tested the impact of differing targets of blame on message support and support for proposed policies through the mediational impact of message credibility. The results indicate perceptions of message credibility significantly varied depending on message exposure, but message credibility may not always act as a mediator for political messages. It may also act as a

suppressor variable magnifying the effects of conflict rhetoric and, therefore, is an important factor that should be considered when investigating the effects of negative messages.

Importantly, direct effects indicate that blame messages can negatively impact perceptions of an outgroup and lead to greater support for punitive policy.

Chapter five explores how the different emotions aroused by a blame message impact political support, measured as democratic support. Research indicates that emotions may be the connection between political messages and political support and researchers have begun to seriously examine the link between emotions and vote choice (e.g. Marcus & MacKuen, 1993; Redlawsk, Civettini & Lau, 2007), participation (e.g. Groenendyk, 2011; Valentino, Gregorowicz & Groenendyk, 2009), partisanship (e.g. Weeks, 2015), activism (e.g. Roser & Thompson, 1995), and attitude change (e.g. Smith, 2014; O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009). Yet, little research explores the impact negative emotions have on some of the more nebulous aspects of regime support. Attack rhetoric is not new to politics, but, as *New York Times* columnist Thomas Edsall (2017) recently argued, conventional norms keeping political discourse within the bounds of truth and good taste seem to have been abandoned and may be a contributor to the recent documented decline in democratic support (e.g. Foa & Mounk, 2017). This research seeks to answer whether attack rhetoric is contributing to declining support for democratic governance and values by testing the impact of conflict rhetoric on democratic support through the mediating impact of emotional arousal. As expected, emotional arousal varied by treatment condition. Participants who received a no blame message reported significantly more positive emotions than those who received a blame message. Those who received a blame message reported significantly higher negative emotions than those who received a no blame message. Differences in emotional arousal in response to variations in

blame did influence levels of democratic support, in both positive and negative ways. However, significant mediation results were more consistent for positive than negative emotions and along each dimension of democratic support, the emotions elicited resulted in the same directional impact.

Conclusion

Taken together, the research presented in this dissertation provides a broad understanding of the impact conflict and its accompanying rhetoric has on political support in the electorate. This research contributes to the extensive literature on the various forms of conflict rhetoric by examining the differential impact of strategically placed blame on partisanship, policy support, and democratic support.

Research has examined the role of partisanship in contributing to the negative tone of political rhetoric (e.g. Morris & Witting, 2001; Harbridge & Malhotra, 2011; Grimmer, 2013; Wolf, Strachan & Shea, 2012), but it has overlooked the impact conflict rhetoric has on partisanship. Article one helps to fill this gap by examining whether blame messages increase or decrease strength of partisan identity and, subsequently, perceptions of competence of and feelings for the political parties. Article two adds to the sparse literatures on negativity and credibility (e.g. Hilbig, 2009; Hilbig, 2012; Fessler, Pisor & Navarete, 2014) and the effects of blame on policy support (e.g. Barry, Brescoll, Brownell, & Schlesinger, 2009; Thibodeau, Perko & Flusberg, 2015) by examining these relationships in an explicitly political context. Additionally, this article bridges theories from sociology, communication, and psychology to make a theoretical contribution to the understanding of the impact of media on politics and public policy. Lastly, article three contributes to the growing literature on the role emotions play in political behavior and attitudes (e.g. Brader, Marcus & Miller, 2011; Smith, 2014; Valentino,

Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz, & Hutchings, 2011; Ryan, 2012) by using targeted blame messages to induce emotional reactions and examining their impact on a previously unexplored area, support for democratic governance and values.

CHAPTER 2

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

It's Us Against Them: Conflict Rhetoric and Political Support

Harold Lasswell (1936) is credited with defining politics as the means of deciding “who gets what, when and how,” a useful heuristic for explaining the complicated maneuvering of different groups in the struggle for scarce resources. According to Lasswell (1936), it is the influential who “get the most of what there is to get” (p. 295). In the struggle to exert influence, rhetoric is central to creating political images for public consumption and evaluation. Rhetoric is a key component at every stage of political debate because it is where “ideas are fashioned into arguments with a certain force and direction in order to win the assent of an audience” (Martin, 2014, p. 9). It is through rhetoric that politicians and other political actors most directly attempt to persuade the public to hold certain viewpoints. In this research, I assume that the rhetoric in which politicians engage are purposive actions meant to manipulate the perceptions and attitudes of message receivers. As a political tool, rhetoric affords politicians the opportunity to simplify complex social problems to neatly packaged tropes that can influence policy demand and political support in the electorate.

Conflict rhetoric, and blaming specifically, is well-suited to political debate because it is designed to draw attention to social group differences, create inter-group tension and promote “us versus them” narratives to pit one group against another. It is human nature to self-categorize, but the positive value put on a group identity happens through comparison to other groups (Tajfel, 1978). Because it is based on perceived rather than formal belonging (Greene, 1999), social group identity is easily activated and strengthened by conflict (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). As a rhetorical strategy, blaming is constructed specifically to persuade a targeted audience rather than to call out the blamed (Hlavacik, 2016; Burke, 1969). The group targeted for blame is merely a prop serving the message sender’s intention to stoke anger and anxiety

about a social problem. As a strategy to raise political support from a specific group, such rhetoric is meant to reassure the target audience that someone is attentive to their plight.

Targeting a group for blame allows political actors to appear to be responsive to policy issues because blaming identifies for politicians a scapegoat against whom they can act. But, these storylines diminish the power of factual knowledge as group-based beliefs and emotions hold sway (Fischer, 2003), because blaming identifies for the afflicted the group toward which they should direct their anger and anxiety. Blaming is an intentionally divisive strategy because by appealing to one group, political actors are necessarily alienating another.

People identify with multiple groups throughout their lives (e.g. Catholics, Hispanics, students, parents), providing many opportunities for politicians to emphasize group differences and generate antagonism. Not all group conflict, however, will evoke the same emotional and cognitive reactions in the target audience and the impact on different dimensions of political support may vary. Further, some dimensions of political support may not be susceptible to manipulation through group conflict. I expect that the strength and direction of influence will vary depending on the group conflict created and the dimension of political support tested. The ease and frequency with which politicians engage in conflict rhetoric implies a belief in its power to shape political outcomes, but, as suggested in the literature, this time-honored tradition may be a double-edged sword. There probably is little reason to doubt that creating conflict is an easy way for political actors to gain attention, however, the research indicates that there is plenty of reason to doubt that it is a sure-fire strategy for success.

The main premise of this research is that conflict rhetoric, manifested as blaming, is a regularly relied upon political tool used with the intention of activating various social identities in the electorate to sow anger and anxiety toward out-groups and reap in-group support. Despite

the seemingly ubiquitous use of group-based appeals in political rhetoric, the research studying conflict rhetoric focuses almost exclusively on the behavioral effects of political parties or candidates attacking each other (i.e. negative campaign advertising). Targeting non-political groups as the cause of social ills is a common rhetorical tool and is frequently reflected in public policy (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). This research will extend the literature by comparing the effect of attacks on opposing parties to attacks on non-political groups. Specifically, the purpose of this research is to understand the circumstances in which conflict rhetoric is a useful and beneficial strategy for political actors. Figure 2.1 illustrates the relationship between conflict rhetoric and political support as conceptualized in this research.

Conceptualizing Political Support

Political support is a multi-dimensional concept that has been characterized as having two main components: specific and diffuse support (Easton, 1975). Easton defines support generally as “the way in which a person evaluatively orients himself or some object through either his attitudes or his behavior” (p. 436). In this sense, political support includes not only tangible actions (i.e. donating money to or voting for a specific candidate), but also latent attitudes including partisan attachment, trust, affect, and perceptions of credibility.

The distinction between specific and diffuse support resides in the object toward which the support is directed. Specific support involves actions and attitudes directed toward incumbent political authorities and institutions based on satisfaction with governmental performance and outputs. Diffuse support is directed more broadly toward the systems, offices and structures that constitute the political community, as well as the individuals holding the offices (Easton, 1975). For example, people may disapprove of President Trump retweeting a gif depicting him hitting Hillary Clinton with a golf ball (Abramson, 2017), an aspect of specific

support, but they still support him as presidential office holder, an aspect of diffuse support.

Political support can be directed at three distinct levels: authorities, regimes, and the political community (Easton, 1975). Authorities refers to politicians as a group and individual political actors; regimes can be understood as the values, institutions and practical functioning of the political system (democratic versus autocratic); and community is the nation state (Norris, 1999). Using Almond and Verba's (1963) categorization of affective versus evaluative beliefs, Dalton (1999) further refines these levels of support by distinguishing three different categories of regime support: regime principles, regime performance, and regime institutions. Affective orientations align with Easton's (1975) diffuse support and involves acceptance of or identification with an entity, while instrumental evaluations align with Easton's categorization of specific support and involves judgments of performance or appropriateness of political phenomena (Dalton, 1999). Table 2.1² presents Dalton's typology of political support with examples of each category.

Dimensions of Political Support

Following Dalton's (1999) typology, this dissertation will focus on the effect conflict rhetoric has on the components "authorities" and "regime." Article one concerns party attachment and party reputation, dimensions of authorities and the regime sub-level political institutions. Article two focuses on aspects of policy support, an affective dimension of the regime sub-level political institutions. And article three, measures support for democratic values and norms, satisfaction with democracy, and trust in institutions, encompassing the three sub-levels of political regimes. The component "communities" is excluded from this research

² Table 2.1 and all subsequent tables can be found in Appendix A.

because the theoretical connection between conflict rhetoric and support for the nation state requires a conceptual framework outside what can reasonably be included in these articles. Additionally, practical constraints with time, money and space prevent the measurement and discussion of every dimension of political support. The following is a description of each dimension of political support measured, as well as intervening, control, and demographic variables.

Partisan Identity

Recent research has conceptualized party identity as a form of social group attachment (e.g. Mason, 2015; Miller & Conover, 2015) akin to ethnicity and religious affiliation. Social identity theory (Greene, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) suggests that by using negativity, politicians can maximize the perceived differences between their in-group (the party affiliated with the sender of the message) and the out-group (the target of the negative attack), thus stimulating favoritism with the in-group. Partisan identity is defined as the extent to which people feel group attachment to a political party. This research tests the extent to which blame messages heighten feelings of partisan attachment. Partisan identity was operationalized in two parts: through a measure of party identity strength and a measure of group attachment.

Party Reputation

A potential benefit to politicians of stronger partisan identity is an increase in positive perceptions of the in-group and negative perceptions of the out-group. Social identity theory suggests that stronger group attachment results in more biased evaluations of the in-group and the out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Benoit (2007) suggests that, in a campaign context, the purpose of attacks is to lower estimation of the opponent while also raising comparative estimation of the attacker. This goal can logically be extended to influencing perceptions of and

feelings toward the political parties more generally. Party reputation, defined as the level of esteem people hold for a political party, is a multi-dimensional concept and includes an affective and an informative component (Butler & Powell, 2014; Stokes, 1963). The affective component is people's orientation (positive or negative) toward the parties. The informative component is often conceptualized as the parties' ideological signals (Butler & Powell, 2014), but has also been conceptualized as issue ownership (Pope & Woon, 2008) or party competence (Jacobsen, 2015). Party reputation was operationalized in two parts: affect for the political parties and perception of party competence.

Message Support

As defined by Easton (1975), part of political support is attitude orientation toward the object, in this case the blame message. Attitude refers to an overall evaluation of persons, objects and issues (Petty & Wegener, 1998) and orientation is the directional (positive or negative) component of the attitude. Political messages are designed to persuade the target audience to the sender's point of view and raise support. As such, part of attitude toward the message is the level of agreement with the opinions expressed in the message, including the characterization of the issue and persons identified in the message. This research tests the effects of blaming on message support as it relates to the policy issue and the target of blame identified in the message.

Policy Support

One aspect of political support is approval of policy initiatives. Fischer (2003) argues that rhetoric can be used by political elites to manage public perception of events, alleviate concerns and reduce demand for policy responses. If rhetoric can serve to reduce policy demand then it should also be capable of increasing demand for action and support for proposed policies.

Blaming, specifically, can be viewed as a call to action (Hlavacik, 2016; Warner, 2005) seeking to persuade a specific audience as to the cause of the problem (blame target) and appropriate measures to deal with it (Hlavacik, 2016). This research tests the effect of blaming on policy support, measured as people's demand for policy action and support for specific public policy interventions.

Democratic Support

As defined by Dalton (1999), one level of political support can be measured through attitudes toward the political regime. This includes latent orientations such as trust in government and belief in democratic governance and values. Declining trust in government, democratic institutions, political leaders, and satisfaction with the political system is well-documented (Foa & Mounk, 2017; Pew, 2017; Jones, 2016), and these attitudes may be influenced by the combative behavior of political elites (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995). This research tests the effects of blaming on people's attitudes toward democracy and the political system, termed here democratic support. Democratic support was operationalized in three parts: trust in institutions, support for democratic governance and values, and satisfaction with the democratic system.

Intervening Variables

Emotions

Conflict rhetoric is designed to stimulate negative emotions such as anger and anxiety and these emotions can impact cognitive reasoning and message response (Westen, 2007). Anger, for example, may lead to regular voting habits because it boosts efficacy, while anxiety under some circumstances can demobilize (Valentino et al., 2011). Anger can also trigger group-based hatred (Groenendyk, 2011) and encourage partisan motivated reasoning (Weeks,

2015). Anxiety encourages information seeking (Groenendyk, 2011), reasoning based on a greater variety of information instead of that most easily accessible (Groenendyk, 2016) and consideration of the information presented rather than partisan leanings (Weeks, 2015). As noted by Petty and Wegener (1998), emotional response is often included in a mediational model of attitude change that has dominated the persuasion literature. This research tests whether participants' emotional responses differ by target of blame and their mediational effects on different dimensions of political support. The emotions measured were: anger, happiness, pride, shame, excitement, sadness, disgust, fear, hope, and anxiety.

Credibility

The persuasive power of a message is related to its credibility (Eisend, 2010; Wilson & Sherrell, 1993), defined as believability (Wathen & Burkell, 2002; Fogg, 1999; Tseng & Fogg, 1999). Therefore, a credible message is more likely to enhance support than a non-credible message. The persuasiveness of a message has been found to be based on two components: source and message credibility (Webb & Eves, 2007). Message credibility has been shown to be based on perceptions of information quality, accuracy and completeness (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007) distinct from perceptions of source credibility (Appelman & Sundar, 2016). This research tests whether participants' perceptions of message credibility differ by target of blame and its mediating effect on measures of regime support.

Control and Demographic Variables

Student Loans

While experiments increase internal validity through more effective elimination of extraneous variables and temporal control not available with other research designs (Singleton & Straits, 2010), the likelihood that student loan reform is a salient issue for respondents introduces

the possibility of response bias. As such, participants were asked questions to capture their familiarity with the student loan debt crisis, their level of concern for this issue, and their personal experience with student loan debt. By controlling for prior knowledge of student loan debt reform and personal experience with student loans, it is more likely any differences detected can be attributed to the result of the manipulation of the message.

Demographics

The survey included questions regarding ideology, age, race, sex, income, education, and political knowledge. If appropriate, statistical analysis included demographic variables likely to influence the dimensions of political support as conceptualized in the theoretical framework of each article. Ideology is likely to influence party attitudes (Miller & Conover, 2015). Age, race, sex, and income are common factors in party divisions (Miller & Conover, 2015; Abramowitz, 2010). Education and political knowledge have been shown to impact attitudes toward democratic norms (Miller & Conover, 2015; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

Table 2.2 provides a list of conceptual definitions for each dimension of political support measured in this research, as well as the independent and intervening variables. The survey questions used to measure each variable are provided in Appendices E (experiment 1) and F (experiment 2). The operationalization of each variable is explained in the relevant article.

Data Collection

This research reports the results of two survey experiments. The first experiment was conducted in the Fall of 2016. Participants (N=439) were students enrolled in political science and communication classes at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK) and the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC), respectively. The second experiment was conducted in the Spring of 2018. Participants (N=1023) were recruited using an online panel service through

Qualtrics, a provider of online survey software, that the University of Tennessee system currently subscribes to for use by faculty, staff, and students. Specific details about methodology are provided in each article. All methods for data collection were reviewed and approved by the UTK (experiments 1 and 2) and UTC (experiment 1) Institutional Review Boards prior to implementation.

CHAPTER 3

NEGATIVE GAINS: HOW ATTACK MESSAGES IMPACT PARTISAN IDENTITY AND PARTY REPUTATION

Introduction

Despite the public's professed dislike of negative political rhetoric and the possibility of backlash (Geer, 2006; Bartels, 2000; Brooks, 2000) politicians continue to employ this strategy to diminish their opponents and bolster their own standing with the public. One goal of message communication is to reinforce support among base constituents (Fenno, 1978). Negative messages, generally defined as a criticism of an opposing politician, party or issue stance (Geer, 2006), allow politicians to highlight what is different or undesirable about the opposition. This differentiation creates for partisans a sense of "otherness" about members of the opposing party, possibly increasing favorability for their own party. Using negativity to "otherize" can create the impression of group conflict where little or none exists, thus increasing the likelihood that people will react to the information as group members rather than individuals (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and rally against the possible negative repercussions for the group. Conceptualizing partisan identity as a form of social group identity, this paper explores whether negativity can help politicians strengthen the support of their base constituents by activating feelings of group attachment.

Beyond its debatable success in dampening candidate appraisal, how and why negativity may directly benefit politicians is overlooked (see Geer, 2006; Soroka, 2014; Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007 for extensive literature reviews). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1986) suggests that group conflict highlighted through negative political messages should induce or reinforce hostility and bias for the out-group, while also increasing positive feelings of loyal attachment to the in-group. If attack messages rouse negative affect for the opposition and activate feelings of attachment for the in-group, it is likely a contributing factor in much of the polarization and accompanying partisan hostility that has intensified in recent years. Using an

original experiment, this study tests the role negative political messages play in stimulating feelings of group identity and esteem for the aligned and opposing parties.

Negativity and Partisan Identity

Although research has long emphasized the importance of party affiliation on political behavior, including opinion formation and voting preferences (e.g. Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Bartels, 2002), researchers have only recently begun to explore party affiliation as a form of social group identity (Miller & Conover, 2015; Mason, 2015, 2013; Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Greene, 1999). A social identity is the self-concept an individual derives from group membership and the emotional value attached to that membership (Tajfel, 1978).

According to social identity theory, it is human nature to self-categorize, but the positive value put on the group identity happens through comparison to other groups, heightening group differences and a sense of “us versus them.” People identify with multiple groups throughout their lives (i.e. child, mother, student, Catholic) and, as experiments in minimal intergroup discrimination have shown (e.g. Oakes & Turner, 1980; Billig & Tajfel, 1973), previous interaction with other group members is not a requisite of social group identification.

Social identity theory suggests group identity does not require formal membership because it is based on perceived rather than formal belonging to a group (Greene, 1999). Group conflict can activate and strengthen a social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), making politics, by nature riddled with conflict between opposing sides, the perfect backdrop for group competition and the emotions attached to group success and failure. As such, the heightened polarization detected among the electorate (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008) suggests that the conflict between political elites has extended to the public in general and is likely resulting in an increase in partisan identity strength. According to Mason (2015; 2013), people do not disagree on issues

any more than they used to, but they do feel more strongly about their own party and more negative affect, bias and anger for the opposing party. People are increasingly behaviorally polarized because party affiliation has developed into a social identity on par with ethnicity and religious affiliation. This research seeks to answer whether, as suggested by social identity theory, politicians benefit from negative messages because it creates and sustains the sense of conflict between the parties, thus activating and heightening partisan group identity.

Changes in the perception of elite polarization can lead to changes in the electorate. Clear party polarization provides better cues to the electorate as to where the parties stand on issues so voters can better align their own preferences and cast the “right” vote (i.e. voting for the party with aligned issue positions; Levendusky, 2010; Hetherington, 2001). But if citizens could not previously perceive the differences between parties to form coherent ideological attitudes across issues (Converse, 1964; Lippman, 1946), something has changed to increase this perception. Layman and Carsey (2002) argue that “conflict extension,” the theory that the parties are divided on a wider range of high and low salience issues than has historically been the case, is leading to more coherent attitudes in the mass public. This supports the claim that parties are providing better cues. But while studies of elite polarization do indicate that the parties are increasingly divided on a broad array of issues (Poole & Rosenthal, 2007), this does not guarantee that the public understands or is aware of the differences. This research asserts that it is the increasing negativity that alerts the public to conflicts and differences between the political parties.

Negative messaging is one tool used by politicians to alert the public to party divisions. Social identity theory (Greene, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) suggests that by using negativity, politicians can maximize the perceived differences between their in-group (the party affiliated

with the sender of the message) and the out-group (the target of the negative attack), thus stimulating favoritism with the in-group. Research linking negativity to increasing mass partisanship and negative affect for opposing parties supports this relationship. Exposure to negative campaign advertising and partisan rhetoric can lead to increased attitude polarization (Meffert, Chung, Joiner, Waks, & Garst, 2006; Garramone, Atkin, Pinkleton, & Cole, 1990) and partisan intensity in the electorate (Morris & Witting 2001). That negativity drives this division is supported by later research linking negative affect for the opposing party to increasing exposure to negative campaigning (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes 2012). Using panel data, the authors demonstrate that affective polarization, the tendency to view opposing partisans negatively and aligned partisans positively (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Campbell et al., 1960; Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002), increased over the course of the 2008 Presidential campaign. The increase was especially pronounced in battleground states where attack advertising was heavier. They conclude that negative campaigns, and exposure to campaigns generally, reinforce partisan identity.

The increasing negativity is not just highlighting what is different about the opposition or their issue stances, it is contributing to the perception that the parties are engaged in an endless struggle where only one can prevail. If one must prevail, then the other must be defeated and it is this threat of defeat that is stimulating stronger partisan identity. Without all the vitriol from political elites it is unlikely people would perceive to the same degree any differences between the parties or feel the same degree of animosity.

While most research discusses negativity, or more broadly incivility, as a consequence of partisan division (e.g. Miller & Conover, 2015; Mason, 2013), and at the elite level this may be accurate, in the electorate it is the exposure to the persistently negative tone of political discourse

that is driving the division. The greater the intensity of intergroup conflict, the more likely that people from opposing sides will respond to each other as group members rather than as individuals (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and, as conflict escalates, people will respond by closing group ranks rather than opening up to different viewpoints. If politicians are always working to further electoral goals (Mayhew, 1974; Fenno, 1978) negative messaging appears to be an effective and efficient way to strengthen their partisan base because it stimulates reliance upon partisan identification and reinforces negative affect for the opposing party. It is most likely that by using negative messages, politicians are not attempting to sway those unlikely to support them, rather, they are looking to reinforce their base constituents and influence the few in the middle who might be reached.

By turning policy debate into an “us against them” discussion politicians can manipulate in the electorate anger and anxiety towards the opposing party and activate and reinforce partisanship. Playing to partisanship through negativity enables politicians to incite behavior similar to that found in sport competitions, where team status and winning overtakes thoughtful deliberation and participation (Miller & Conover, 2015; Mason, 2015). Such rivalry is beneficial to politicians because, as with fans of rival teams, in-group identification is heightened in response to group conflict and strong group identification is often accompanied by negative feelings for out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This decreases the likelihood that out-group members or their views will be accepted. People are less likely to sympathize with or listen to the opposing viewpoints of out-groups (Hart & Nisbett, 2012) and through negativity politicians can create a sense of conflict and rivalry between the parties to encourage out-group bias among partisans and leaners. Rather than politics for the good of the country, negativity induces politics for the good of the party.

With a negative attack politicians can control a portion of the information that people learn about the opposition. In a campaign context, politicians can use negative messages to manipulate what information voters consider when making decisions (Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2009) because people respond more strongly and give more weight to negative information (see Meffert et al., 2006; Fridkin & Kenney, 2004). Through a fear response or risk aversion impulse stimulated by this negativity bias (Lau, 1985), politicians can manipulate citizen's emotions, lessening their ability to act rationally and in their best interests (Geer, 2006; Jamieson, 1992).

A now infamous political campaign example exploiting fear is the 1988 Willie Horton campaign ad run by supporters of George H.W. Bush in his race against Michael Dukakis. The advertisement implied that voting for Governor Dukakis meant accepting policies that put murderers back on the street. The flip side, of course, was that a vote for Vice President Bush would prevent this from becoming a reality. As the success attributed to this example illustrates, negative messages may achieve the desired goals of lowering citizens' evaluations of targeted candidates (Fridkin & Kenney, 2008), by eliciting fear or anger about societal problems or specific policies and highlighting possible harmful outcomes due to action or inaction.

While it is reasonable to suspect that such effects will be more evident during campaigns when political advertisements are numerous and politics is more salient to the general population, it is also reasonable to believe that such effects are not limited to campaigns. Partisan identity transcends the timing of political campaigns (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002). Likewise, negativity in American politics does not start and stop with campaign cycles; rather, it is an integral component of the political process used to continue the sense of struggle and competition between the parties that is readily apparent during campaigns.

Negative messages in political discourse are limited neither to campaigns nor to targeting an opposing candidate or party. Politicians and political parties can also use negative messages to deflect blame for policy failures and rally support for their own policy proposals. The list of possible targets for these criticisms is long and includes people and entities in and outside of government (Hood, 2010). During the 2016 presidential election cycle, Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT) blamed big banks for much of the economic and societal woes in the U.S. (McAuliff, 2015), while Republican candidate Donald Trump targeted Mexicans and Muslims (Deggins, 2015; Healy & Barbaro, 2016). Likewise, Governor Chris Christie (R-NJ) has blamed universities for unmanageable student loan debt (Haddon, 2015). Such messages identify for constituents an out-group at which to direct anger, fear and frustration.

An implication of social group identity is the existence of an in-group (the group with whom one identifies) and an out-group with which to compare the status of one's own group. And while technically any other group qualifies as an out-group, not all out-groups warrant comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). While offering a target of blame may deflect any negative repercussions away from the sender and toward the blame target, as the examples above illustrate, in order for the message to stimulate increased feelings of group identity, the blame target must be a group perceived as similar. The implication of group comparison as defined within social identity theory is that strengthening partisan identity requires specifically blaming the opposing party, not just a group other than the favored political party.

While some research has explored whether differences in message sender (e.g. Dowling & Wichowsky, 2015) and type or degree of negativity (e.g. Fridkin & Kenney, 2008; Brooks & Geer, 2007) impacts the effectiveness of a negative message, the disparate impact of differing targets of blame is as yet unexplored in the literature. Social identity theory suggests that

activation of group identity through awareness of group conflict is dependent, in part, on the conflict being with a comparable out-group. If the negative message does not offer a comparable out-group then the message should not have an impact on strength of identity. Hypothesis one will test whether people's reliance on partisan identity and their response to the negative message depends on the target of the negative attack:

Hypothesis 1: Those who receive a negative message targeting an opposing party will exhibit stronger partisan identity than those who do not receive a negative message targeting an opposing party.

A potential benefit to politicians of stronger partisan identity is an increase in positive perceptions of the in-group and negative perceptions of the out-group. Benoit (2007) suggests that, in a campaign context, the purpose of attacks is to lower estimation of the opponent while also raising comparative estimation of the attacker. This goal can logically be extended to influencing perceptions of and feelings toward the political parties more generally. As such, this research tests the effect of differing targets of blame on party reputation. Party reputation, defined as the level of esteem people hold for a political party, is a multi-dimensional concept and includes a valence and an informative component (Butler & Powell, 2014; Stokes, 1963). The valence component is people's orientation (positive or negative) toward the parties and here is conceptualized as affect. The informative component is often conceptualized as the parties' ideological signals (Butler & Powell, 2014), but has also been conceptualized as issue ownership (Pope & Woon, 2008) or party competence (Jacobsen, 2015).

With awareness of group conflict and heightened group identity should come positive affect for the in-group and negative affect for the out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Greene, 1999). If negative messages strengthen group identity, then such messages should also dampen

estimation of the opposing party and boost estimation of the aligned party. As stated above, the target of political negativity can move beyond the opposing party to non-political entities; however, it is not likely that targeting a non-political entity will elicit negative feelings for the opposing party or an increase in positive feelings for the aligned party. Hypothesis two will test whether targeting a political party is more likely to achieve the desired affect:

Hypothesis 2: People that receive a negative message targeting a political party will feel greater (lesser) affect for the aligned (opposing) party than those who receive a message that does not target a political party.

Attempts to influence the second dimension of party reputation, party competence, can be seen in attacks on policy stances. One party will often ring the alarm for potentially hazardous outcomes of policy proposed by the opposing party, as exhibited through the 1988 Willie Horton ad campaign mentioned earlier. The purpose of this type of attack is to depress the favorability of the proposed policy by highlighting associated risks. However, beyond lowering confidence in the opposing party's policy stance, an implication of such an attack is that the attacking party or politician is better suited to deal with the issue. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), perceived group belonging increases discrimination favoring the in-group. If people favor a particular party, it is likely they will feel that party is more able to deal with problems facing society. Such results are supported by intergroup discrimination research (see Oakes & Turner, 1980). Hypothesis three will test how negative messaging affects people's perceptions of job competence:

Hypothesis 3: People that receive a negative message targeting a political party will have lower (higher) perceptions of party competence for the opposing (aligned) party than those who receive a message that does not target a political party.

Methodology

To test the impact of differing targets of blame on partisan identity and party reputation, I conducted an online survey experiment using a student sample. The survey was administered via the Qualtrics online survey platform. Using a between-subjects 3 x 2 experimental design, participants were randomly assigned to one of six treatment conditions. Each condition consisted of a negative message about student loan debt reform. Despite experiments being low in external validity compared to other methods, they are commonly used in research to test the impact of message variation (i.e. framing effects; e.g. Lecheler, Bos, & Vliegenthart, 2015; Nelson, Clawson & Oxley 1997; Smith & Petty, 1996) because experiments “provide the most rigorous way to establish causal relationships between independent and dependent variables” (Thorson, Wicks & Leshner 2012, p. 112). Controlling for confounding variables through randomization allows researchers to attribute any response differences to the experimental manipulation rather than the personal characteristics of respondents, strengthening support for the theoretical underpinnings of significant results.

Sample

Participants (N= 392) were undergraduate students enrolled at two southern universities. Participation in the study was voluntary; students received extra credit for participation. The sample was predominantly white (80%), female (55%), and, not surprisingly, young ($M=20.23$, $SD=2.64$, range 18-39). Forty-seven percent identified as conservative, forty-one percent as liberal, and twelve percent as neither conservative nor liberal. Sixty-eight percent of participants

expected to have student loan debt upon graduation. A full breakdown of respondent characteristics is provided in Table 3.1³.

Procedure

All participants answered questions consisting of control variables regarding student loans. Next, participants were exposed to the stimulus condition, a news article excerpt about the student loan debt reform. Last, participants answered questions regarding their level of partisan attachment, affect and estimation for the political parties, and demographic variables.

Manipulation

The experimental manipulation was a negative message about student loan debt reform varying the attribution of blame for the student loan debt crisis (Republican or Democratic Party, universities, and no target of blame) and the political party affiliation of the message sender (Republican or Democratic Party). A message received from a Republican politician either targeted the Democratic Party, targeted universities or contained no target. Likewise, a message received from a Democratic politician either targeted the Republican Party, targeted universities or contained no target. Table 3.2 displays the experimental design. A manipulation test run prior to the full experiment indicated the treatment conditions were successful in alerting the participant to the political party affiliation of the message sender and the target of blame.

Messages that included a target of blame were worded as follows:

[Republican/Democratic] Representative Robert Murphy blames [Democrats/Republicans/universities] for not doing enough to address the problems of student loan debt and soaring costs that have inflated tuition rates. “The [Democrats/

³ Table 3.1 and all subsequent tables can be found in Appendix A.

Republicans/universities] are proposing policy changes that won't slow the rising cost of college and won't lower total debt owed and payments to a manageable level," Mr. Murphy said. "Listening to [Democrats/Republicans/universities] will make this crisis worse."

Messages with no target of blame were worded:

[Republican/Democratic] Representative Robert Murphy wants to address the problems of student loan debt and soaring costs that have inflated tuition rates. "Current policy changes won't slow the rising cost of college and won't lower total debt owed and payments to a manageable level," Mr. Murphy said.

As a policy issue, student loan reform is an area where there is some bipartisan agreement that something needs to be done, but disagreement over how to fix the issue (Madison, 2013); there is also evidence of negative economic and social ramifications affecting the U.S. at large due to excessive student loan debt and people's inability to make payments (Korkki, 2014). While this issue is likely to be highly salient to a portion of the population, especially students, it is not an issue that receives constant attention in the press, therefore, it was unlikely many respondents would be well informed on where each party stands on the issue or the details of the debate. This made it more likely that participants did not already have strongly held beliefs about the causes of the student loan crisis or what should be done and, therefore, may be more susceptible to messaging. Additionally, the issue can be conceived of as the result of poor student loan policy and thus blamed on the policies supported by either political party; alternatively, the student loan debt problem can be conceived of as the result of high tuition rates and blamed on universities' policies.

Measures

The dependent variable, strength of partisan identity was operationalized in two parts: through a measure of party identity strength and a measure of group attachment. Party reputation was operationalized through a valence and informative component. Table 3.3 provides summary statistics of all dependent variable measures.

Partisan Identity Strength. After indicating party affiliation, participants answering Republican or Democrat were asked to place themselves on a 7-point scale ranging from “Strong Democrat” to “Strong Republican.” Participants answering “Independent” were asked to indicate towards which party they generally leaned, Republican, Democratic or neither, as leaners often have strong affective ties to one party (Miller & Conover, 2015; Petrocik, 2009). Following Petrocik (1974), the scale was then folded to ignore partisan direction, creating a 5-point scale from 0 to 4 measuring strength of affiliation (no preference, weak, leaner, moderate, strong). Leaners were placed following weak partisans because for many variables related to partisanship leaners indicate stronger preferences than weak partisans (Petrocik, 1974).

Group attachment was measured by 10 items on a 5-point Likert-like scale (*does not describe my feelings to clearly describes my feelings*) adapted from Mael and Tetrick’s (1992) *Identification with a Psychological Group Scale* (IDPS), found to be a robust and reliable measure (Greene, 1999; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Mael & Tetrick, 1992), with “Democrat(s)” or “Republican(s)” substituted as the referent group:

- When someone criticizes my political party, it feels like a personal insult.
- I don’t act like the typical member of my political party.
- I’m very interested in what others think about my political party.
- The limitations associated with my political party apply to me also.

- When I talk about my political party I usually say “we” rather than “they.”
- I have a number of qualities typical of members of my political party.
- My political party’s successes are my successes.
- If a story in the media criticized my political party, I would feel embarrassed.
- When someone praises my political party, it feels like a personal compliment.
- I act like a member of my political party to a great extent.

A test of Cronbach’s alpha produced a reliability coefficient of $\alpha=0.8846$ indicating a strong relationship between the concept measured by each question. Questions were averaged to create a single indicator for strength of group identity. Party identity strength and group identity strength were moderately correlated ($r=0.484$), indicating that the two scales measure related but not identical constructs (Singleton & Straits, 2010).

Party Reputation. The valence component of party reputation was measured with a feeling thermometer question similar to that used on the ANES survey, “On a scale from 0 to 10, please indicate how you feel about the [Republican/Democratic] party, with 10 meaning a very warm, favorable feeling, 0 meaning a very cold, unfavorable feeling, and 5 meaning not particularly warm or cold” for each party. For the informative component, participants were asked, “Please indicate the degree to which the statement below represents what you believe. [Republicans/Democrats] would do a better job dealing with student loan reform.” Participants answered on 5-point semantic differential scales, disagree/agree and false/true. This format was adapted from the *Generalized Belief Measure* developed by McCroskey and Richmond (1996; McCroskey & Teven, 1999) to measure perceptions of believability and to capture attitude certainty. These two questions produced very strong correlations for each party ($r>0.88$) and were averaged to create one job competence score.

Student Loans. To control for any response bias associated with knowledge of the student loan reform debate or personal experience with student loans, participants were asked: “how familiar are you with proposals for student loan debt reform?”; “how concerned are you about the issue of student loan debt reform?”; “how important an issue is student loan debt reform?”; and “as a student, do you expect to have student loan debt upon graduation?”

Results

One purpose of this study was to determine how differing the blame target influenced people’s strength of partisan identity, therefore, true independents (N=28), as sorted through the party identity questions were excluded from the analysis of partisan identity strength. Table 3.4 displays how participants self-labeled on the party identity strength scale.

Hypothesis one predicted that those who received a negative message targeting an opposing party would exhibit stronger partisan identity than those who did not receive a negative message targeting an opposing party. Using three dichotomous variables (targeting the opposing party, targeting universities, and no target), Table 3.5 displays the mean party identity strength and mean group identity strength for each condition. Contrary to expectations, people who read a no blame message indicated the highest levels of partisan identity strength for both measures.

Table 3.6 reports the results of OLS regression analysis using the first measure of strength of partisan identity, the folded scale created from the party affiliation strength question, and the three dummy variables. Model 1 reports the results with the no blame group as the excluded condition. Blaming an opposing party decreased party identity strength by 0.269 units ($p < 0.05$, two-tailed) compared to those who received a no blame message. These results do not support hypothesis one and suggest the opposite relationship – attacking the opposing party may result in weaker party identification strength. Participants also indicated lower party identity

strength in the blame opposing party conditions compared to the blame universities condition ($b = -0.223, p < 0.10$), but results were not significant at the 95% confidence level (Model 2).

However, these results may indicate a trend that was not adequately captured with this sample, that compared to other types of blame messages, people react negatively when the political parties attack each other. No significant difference was detected between the blame universities and no blame groups.

Using the IDPS scale as the dependent variable (Table 3.7), no results were significant at the 95% confidence level for any condition and Hypothesis 1 was not supported. However, as with the results for party identity strength, the differences between the blame opposing party and no blame conditions ($b = -0.180, p < 0.10$, two-tailed) may indicate a negative trend in reactions to the political parties attacking each other. The results for the two measures of partisan identity are contrary to expectations and may be indicative of participants' aversion to the partisan behavior displayed in the negative message as suggested in some research (e.g. Morris & Witting, 2001; Harbridge & Malhotra, 2011).

Hypotheses two and three predicted that people who receive a blame message targeting an opposing party would exhibit greater estimation for the aligned party's reputation and lower estimation for the opposing party's reputation than those who receive a message that does not target an opposing party. Using the dummy variables, blame opposing party, blame universities, and no blame, Tables 3.8 and 3.9 display the mean affect and party competence for each party by treatment group and participant party alignment. Not surprisingly, mean scores indicate that participants consistently rated their aligned party higher than the opposing party regardless of message exposure. Interestingly, Democratic participants rated their own party lower on each dimension of party reputation for the blame opposing party condition compared to the blame

universities and no blame conditions, while Republican participants rated their party lower for affect, but higher for party competence.

To test whether these rating differences were significant, OLS regression coefficients were estimated by participant party affiliation. Tables 3.10 and 3.11 display the results for affect for the Democratic and Republican Parties, respectively (H2). Models 1 and 2 displayed in Table 3.10 indicate that participants aligned with the Democratic Party in the blame opposing party condition felt significantly less affect for the Democrats compared to those in the no blame ($b = -1.290, p < 0.01$, two-tailed) and blame universities ($b = -0.869, p < 0.05$, two-tailed) conditions. No significant differences between conditions were found for Republican aligned participants affect for the Democratic Party (Models 3 and 4). As reported in Table 3.11, treatment conditions had no significant effect on affect for the Republican Party for participants aligned with either party. These results do not support hypothesis two, but for participants aligned with the Democratic Party they do reinforce the surprising results for party identification. It appears that messages attacking an opposing party may diminish base support for the Democratic Party.

Tables 3.12 and 3.13 display the results for the impact of differing targets of blame on Democratic and Republican Party competence, respectively (H3). Models 1 and 2 in Table 3.12 indicate that participants aligned with the Democratic Party in the blame opposing party condition rated the Democratic Party significantly lower on job competence compared to those in the no blame ($b = -0.375, p < 0.05$, two-tailed) and blame universities ($b = -0.360, p < 0.05$, two-tailed) conditions. These results align with those found for affect, indicating that blaming the opposing party may be detrimental to the Democratic Party. No significant differences between

conditions were found for Republican aligned participants' ratings of Democratic Party competence (Models 3 and 4).

As reported in Table 3.13, no significant differences between treatment conditions were found for Republican Party competence for participants aligned with either party. The comparison between the blame opposing party and no blame conditions is worth noting. Results for both Democratic ($b=0.283, p<0.10$, two-tailed) and Republican ($b=0.307, p<0.10$, two-tailed) participants (Models 5 and 7) suggest that the blame opposing party condition may have enhanced rather than diminished perception of party competence for the Republican Party. While these results are not conclusive, it is interesting that the treatment conditions appeared to have opposite effects on each party.

The results for party competence do not support Hypothesis three, but are, nevertheless, noteworthy because they indicate that as a strategic tool, blaming the opposing party may backfire for the Democratic Party yet may help the Republican Party, even with Democratic partisans. In further analysis using all participants, those exposed to the blame opposing party treatment rated the Republican Party significantly better on party competence than those exposed to the no blame condition ($b=0.315, p<0.01$, two-tailed). Results comparing the blame universities condition trended in the same direction ($b=0.198, p<0.10$, two-tailed). It appears that messages blaming the opposing party helped the Republican Party with participants regardless of party affiliation.

Discussion

This research tested whether differing targets of blame in negative political messages will lead to variations in participants' strength of partisan identity and estimation of party reputation. As suggested by social identity theory, creating conflict through rhetoric such as blame messages

should strengthen social identity and negatively impact perceptions of the outgroup.

Specifically, this research hypothesized that a message blaming an opposing party, as compared to a no blame message or one blaming a non-political group will strengthen partisan identity and enhance party reputation for the in-group, while damaging party reputation for the out-group. Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes' (2012) provide evidence in part supporting this supposition using data from the 2004 Blair Center Election Study. They found that people in battleground states where negative attack advertising was heavier reported higher levels of affective partisanship compared to those in non-battleground states.

The results for the experiment reported here do not support that blame messages enhance partisan identity or party reputation, especially for the Democratic Party. Contradicting expected results, party identity strength, the first indicator of partisan identity, was weakest among participants exposed to a blame message targeting an opposing party. Results for the second measure of partisan identity strength, group attachment, also provided weak evidence that blaming the opposing party diminished partisan identity. Further, both measures of party reputation, affect and job competence, were significantly diminished for the Democratic Party among democratic respondents. Affect for the Republican Party was not impacted by any blame message, but results for Republican Party competence, while weak and inconclusive, do suggest that it was enhanced by the blame opposing party message among participants in both parties. Taken together, these results are surprising and indicate that negative messages that promote conflict between the parties can have unexpected and, for the most part, undesirable results in terms of benefiting the political parties.

The mixed results for hypothesis two and three suggest that negative messages may hurt the Democratic Party and help the Republican Party. When parsed by participant party

affiliation, the results indicate that it was only Democrats that reacted strongly to the differing messages. Democrats in the blame opposing party conditions reported lower affect and party competence for their own party, but not for the Republican Party. It appears that, for the Democratic Party, negative messages can drive away partisans. In the same condition, Republican Party competence was weakly boosted among all participants. It seems counterintuitive that a message would diminish party identity, while at the same time increasing estimation as suggested by the results for the Republican Party. The answer to this puzzle may be in differential expectations of behavior from the two political parties or behavioral differences between partisans from each party. The effects on party identity found with this experiment also contradict expectations from prior research (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). Together, this indicates that the impact of negative political messages may not be uniform across people and situations, which may help explain the contradictory results reported in the negativity literature.

These results do not support the hypothesized relationships, but they may not be counterintuitive. Some research indicates that going negative in a campaign can backfire, resulting in diminished views of both candidates (Peterson & Djupe, 2005; Damore, 2002; Hale, Fox, & Farmer, 1996; Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Theilmann & Wilhite, 1998), and a similar result may have occurred here. A message intended to boost partisan identity and estimation backfired and instead depressed it. Research suggests that citizen's dislike of Congress is based on Congressional behavior (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995) and, in the aggregate, citizens do not respond positively to partisan behavior such as exhibited through negative rhetoric (Morris & Witting, 2001) or party conflict (Harbridge & Malhotra, 2011). The weaker partisan identity strength exhibited by participants exposed to a blame message targeting an opposing party may be another indicator of an already recognized trend in American politics.

While these results are not generalizable to the U.S. population, they raise the possibility that the rising share of the electorate that claims no party affiliation may be, in part, a reaction to the increasingly negative tone of political discourse. That those who received a no blame message exhibited the highest levels of party identity strength and no discernible difference was found compared to those who received a blame universities message may indicate it is specifically negative messages attacking the opposing party that respondents found most objectionable, not negative messages generally. This is supported by research studying the positive effects of negativity (e.g. Geer, 2006).

Limitations

There are three major limitations associated with this study. The first is the use of a student sample. While the results found are interesting and counterintuitive, a student sample limits the implications that can be drawn from these results about the general population. However, the purpose of this study was to test that the theoretical relationship hypothesized exists and student samples are more than adequate to this task as surface realism is not critical to this assessment (Shapiro, 2002; Mook, 1983). That the results were the opposite of what was expected indicates that further study with a representative sample is warranted in order to draw conclusions about the generalizability of the findings.

The second major limitation is that the treatment consisted of only one exposure to a single blame message. In reality, people who follow current events are likely to be exposed to multiple negative messages from differing viewpoints, so results from one specific example of a negative message does not allow for generalizations across message types. That one relatively civil blame message produced some significant, but surprising, results suggests that negative messages may have an impact on perceptions of and attachment to the political parties, but

studies varying the type and number of negative messages and the policy issue highlighted are needed to draw more definitive conclusions.

The third major limitation was that the data for this experiment was collected during the Fall of 2016, an especially politically contentious time. The 2016 Presidential election appeared unusual for its level of personal incivility between the candidates and lack of focus on substantive policy issues. It may be that even among this student sample, partisan identity and perceptions of the political parties were already impacted to a degree that exposure to the stimulus had limited impact. Additionally, Bernie Sanders campaigned in part on free college tuition (see BernieSanders.com), a policy proposal unlikely to succeed, but one that may have resonated with the sample used for this research. It is possible that the uneven response between party affiliations is due in part to electoral disappointment among democratic respondents.

Conclusion

This study supports and extends previous research demonstrating that negative messages impact information processing and attitude formation (see Soroka, 2006; Meffert et al., 2006; Smith & Petty, 1996; Lau, 1982) by examining the differential effects of strategically placed blame on partisan identity and party reputation. Overall, the results of this research do not support the relationship between negative rhetoric and partisan support as predicted by social identity theory: that creating conflict between oppositional groups through political rhetoric will boost social identity and dampen goodwill toward the outgroup. The results tell the opposite tale, that focusing on conflict can backfire and promote negative attitudes toward the in-group. If anything, these results suggest that the political parties are better off not attacking each other through political messaging. An explanation for these results may be found in the literature studying the role of emotions in intergroup relations. Research indicates that when group

members feel shame in response to in-group actions group identity will be negatively affected (Kuppens & Yzerbyt, 2014; Iyer & Leech, 2008; Smith, Seger & Mackie, 2007). It may be that some participants were repulsed by attack messages from their own party. Further research exploring the emotions elicited by negative rhetoric will likely shed light on its impact on partisan support.

CHAPTER 4

YOU'VE GOT TO ACCENTUATE THE NEGATIVE: MEDIATIZATION, GROUP CONFLICT, AND BUILDING POLICY SUPPORT

Introduction

Negative discourse in politics is often blamed on the media's focus on conflict and drama. "If it bleeds, it leads," goes the maxim that betrays the priority of shock and awe in news media coverage driven by commercialization. While, the news generally covers activities considered undesirable (i.e. crime, corruption, vice; Gans, 1979), it is shaped to attract audiences, and the focus on controversial events maintains and intensifies conflict between groups creating a "political spectacle" for the entertainment of the observer (Edelman, 1988). Indeed, news is triggered by adverse events and tends to emphasize "conflict, dissension and battle" over "civil harmony" (Schudson, 2011, p. 44). The explosion of communications experts employed in politics indicates that government officials know of and exploit this media logic (Landerer, 2013). The focus on discord reduces complex problems to a "morality tale of battle" between hero and villain (p. 42), thus implicitly expressing which behaviors are desirable, who is to blame and reinforcing accepted social values (Gans, 1979). As such, to understand the media's tendency to cover conflict over harmony as merely contributing to the increasingly negative tone of politics simplifies the impact the media has on politics and society.

Politics is by nature riddled with conflict, and the struggle between groups over "who gets what, when and how" (Lasswell, 1936) naturally lends itself to hyperbole and "us versus them" narratives. Through this conflict rhetoric government officials can highlight group differences, connect undesirable behaviors to out-groups and link unwelcome social changes to them. The most obvious forms of conflict rhetoric are negative attacks such as those found in campaign advertising and blame messages such as those found in policy debate. Recent research has tracked increasing campaign negativity over time (Geer, 2012; Fowler & Ridout, 2012; Franklin-Fowler & Ridout, 2016) and this trend is intimated in studies outside the campaign

context (Grimmer, 2013; Lee, 2016). Not surprisingly, most prior research on negativity focuses on the behavioral effects of political advertising (e.g. Fridkin & Kenney, 2004; Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Geer, 2006; Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013) and the negative emphasis in news coverage (e.g. Dunaway, 2012). Beyond implications for policy debate (e.g. Grimmer, 2013), however, little research has addressed the impact negativity and other types of conflict rhetoric have on the public policy process. The first section of this article presents a framework within which to understand the media's impact on political discourse and how this impact can be traced throughout the policy process. The second section reports the results of an original experiment testing the impact of conflict rhetoric on message and policy support, and the final section discusses the implications of the findings.

Mediatization, Social Construction and Public Policy

Most research studying the relationship between the media and public policy has focused on the media's ability to shape what issues the public thinks about (public agenda setting; e.g. Iyengar & Kinder, 2010) and how they think about these issues (framing/influence; e.g. Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997), as well as what issues politicians debate (political agenda setting; e.g. Van Aelst, Thesen, Walgrave, & Vliegenthart, 2014) and political actors' ability to shape what the media report (indexing; e.g. Gershon, 2012). But, such effects reduce the media's influence to a direct one-way interaction that fails to capture its full impact on society. Recent research suggests that the media's impact on public policy is a more pervasive, and perhaps insidious, influence through societal-level adjustments to the media's continuing evolution and governance over how we communicate.

Mediatization theory focuses on how society is increasingly "mediatized," meaning that "communication refers to media and uses media so that media in the long run increasingly

become relevant for the social construction of everyday life, society and culture as a whole” (Krotz, 2009, as quoted in Adolf, 2011, p. 156). *New media* and its modes of use have altered the pattern of interaction between the media, the public and political actors (Armoudian & Crigler, 2010) from a primarily one-way passive reception to a more interactive exchange. As this evolution has impacted patterns of communicative behavior and the way we construct reality, the influence of traditional media has diminished. When mediatization occurs, media logic, or the “media-specific rules of selecting, interpreting, and constructing political news messages,” has institutionalized beyond the traditional media realm to define appropriate rules of behavior (Esser, 2013, p. 159).

The mediatization of politics is evident in the rising frequency of political actors communicating in terms amenable to media logic, such as in negative campaign advertising (Fowler & Ridout, 2012), vitriolic policy debate (Grimmer, 2013), and generally combative and uncivil political rhetoric (Galston, 2013). The media prioritizes the contest between groups by focusing on conflict, negativity and drama (Gans, 1979), and political actors can increase the likelihood of receiving media attention by adapting their language to this negative form of communication. Full mediatization occurs only when political actors have gone beyond acceptance of and adaptation to media logic to the total adoption of media logic in communicative behavior (Strömbäck, 2008), meaning that politicians intuitively adhere to media logic in their communication strategy and efforts. This self-mediatization, or internalization of the standards of newsworthiness, has led to more negative, conflict-driven news coverage (Esser, 2013), but it has also led to the dominance of conflict rhetoric in unmediated forms of political communication.

Perhaps the best example of this is President Trump's frequent use of Twitter to attack and insult his opponents and cast blame for a variety of failures and problems (Ott, 2017). Ott (2017) argues that it is the brief and impulsive nature of social media interactions, particularly Twitter, that is driving the decline in civility in public discourse. The brevity and anonymity of much social media interaction is especially suited for harsh criticism and vitriolic attacks (Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts & Barberá, 2017), as is indicated with incidents of online trolling and cyberbullying. But, mediatization theory helps explain why people tend to employ negative discourse to begin with: we have been conditioned to believe negativity will garner greater media attention. Indeed, Trump's ability to use Twitter to drive traditional news coverage of himself (Wells, et al., 2016) indicates that he knows what sells. The rising importance of the internet and social media as a source of news (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017; Gottfried & Shearer, 2017) has diminished the influence and power of traditional media as gatekeepers and agenda setters. As Ott (2017) points out, the traditional news media increasingly are turning to Twitter and its negativity as the impetus for news coverage (see also Parmalee, 2013). The media has long created a political spectacle to attract the audience (Edelman, 1988), but with the media evolution, Trump and other political actors now have more power to create the spectacle that captivates audiences, the media, and the public, alike. That this might be the tail wagging the dog exemplifies the pervasiveness of media logic.

In a prescient and somewhat alarming article, Patterson (1996) argues that news coverage which includes journalists' interpretation of politicians' motives and actions looks like watchdog journalism, but is not. Rather, this interpretive journalism is ideological in its premise and cynically assumes politicians act solely out of self-interest instead of political conviction. As such, "conflict, always an element of political coverage, became the predominant theme" (p.

103), which has robbed political leaders of the public confidence to govern effectively and has forced politicians to interact in a specific way. A conclusion to be drawn from this observation is that the media's tendency to assume the role of cynical critic encourages in politicians the notion that negativity and blame are necessary and effective tools to gain attention and support. Therefore, their use of conflict rhetoric in social media and other direct, unmediated communication is logical. For politicians, President Trump's skill at using Twitter for audience manipulation may be an outlier, but it also may be a harbinger of elite communication strategy.

Reliance on conflict rhetoric to rally support even through unmediated forms of political communication indicates that negativity, blame and conflict are increasingly accepted as the norm for political discourse and may even be second nature for some political actors, as predicted by mediatization theory (Strömbäck, 2008). With mediatization, media logic is integral, consciously or not, to the policy-making process (Strömbäck, 2008), and the impact of the increasing vitriol on public policy is a legitimate cause for concern (Grimmer, 2013). As predicted by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), conflict rhetoric can create awareness of group differences, injecting an "us versus them" attitude into group interactions that increases negative affect for outgroups. By focusing on conflict rather than common ground, politicians can manipulate anger and anxiety between groups in the electorate and incite behavior where winning overtakes thoughtful deliberation and participation (Miller & Conover, 2015; Mason, 2015). When groups hold antagonistic and negative views of others, policy becomes a means to ensure continued dominance by the powerful, rather than an effort to work toward the common good (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). In the struggle to maintain status, people are less likely to sympathize with or listen to opposing viewpoints (Hart & Nisbett, 2012) and cooperation and compromise between groups is unlikely. Conflict rhetoric can heighten this

sense of zero-sum competition where conceding to others means a loss to the in-group. After all, it is far easier to rally support against a common enemy than to convince people that everyone will benefit from addressing the underlying social and institutional mechanisms that inhibit the success of the less powerful. In this light, Patterson's (1996) argument that interpretive news coverage portraying political actors as purely self-interested is less a lament about the nature of the news than a prediction of where conflict rhetoric will lead.

As a tool to control the narrative around a policy issue, rhetoric is "where political meanings are negotiated" (Beasley, 2001, p. 24), including negatively constructing a target group for blame. By using rhetoric to create negative group images, officials appeal to group identities, link unwanted behaviors to targeted out-groups, and identify which groups will be rewarded and punished through public policy (Ingram & Schneider, 2005). Problem definition is where rhetoric most obviously impacts public policy because, as Schattschneider (1960) observed, "the definition of alternatives is the supreme instrument of power" (p. 68). Through rhetoric, policy actors orient and limit attention by identifying a cause and constraining solutions (Rocheffort & Cobb, 1994; Best, 1989). In other words, problem definition is how policy actors construct social problems to limit consideration to preferred alternatives; and, part of problem definition is the identification of a group to associate with the problem as justification for policy prescriptions.

Public policy is a means for the government to influence or control the behavior of individuals, groups and entities to reach desired outcomes. Policy problems are often identified to fit already available solutions (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015), and to increase the likelihood of success for preferred policies, lawmakers must develop a rationale for their policy designs (Sidney, 2005). Rhetoric can be used to create political opportunity and avoid risk by

manipulating citizens' perceptions of different social groups (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). With the language of conflict, political leaders can "link problems and solutions in ways that tap into people's preexisting notions of who is to blame for a social crisis" (Newton, 2005, p. 142). Issues often involve groups already deemed problematic (Newton, 2005; Stone, 1989) and blame messages are specifically designed to create negative affect between groups over perceived or threatened loss of status, increasing the likelihood that aggrieved groups will rally against these possible negative repercussions and demand policy change. Through targeting groups to blame, politicians create credit-taking opportunities to prescribe preferred solutions for social ills and to act against those "causing" the problem.

Such rhetoric reinforces negative perceptions and stereotypes, often leading to policies that exacerbate (perhaps intentionally) the inequities they are meant to alleviate (Sidel, 2000). Blaming is a common rhetorical strategy constructed specifically to persuade a targeted audience rather than to call out the blamed (Hlavacik, 2016; Burke, 1969). The blamed are merely a prop serving the message sender's intention to stoke anger and anxiety about a social problem. Strategically, this rhetoric is meant to reassure the target audience that someone is attentive to their plight by identifying for the afflicted toward whom they should direct their anger and anxiety. Because these storylines diminish the power of factual knowledge in favor of group-based beliefs and emotions (Fischer, 2003), politicians can reinforce the unfavorable perceptions and stereotypes underlying negatively constructed groups and limit the types of policies applied to them.

An example of this is the focus on illegal and legal immigrants as a driver of falling wages and employment among working class citizens. This argument plays on the fears of the unknown to present a simple solution that is easily conveyed to the public: *keeping immigrants*

out will save your jobs. This ignores the confluence of factors such as globalization, monopoly power, advancing technologies, stagnant wages, and dying industries that have led to these problems and limits the search for policy solutions to those that will remove or keep out immigrants. Such arguments use broad rhetorical strokes to reduce complex social problems to “us versus them” dynamics and are specifically designed to create fear and anger between groups rather than to promote fact-based discussion, reasoning, and compromise. As the aggrieved groups rally in support of these messages and demand policy action, it becomes easier to justify coercive or punitive policies against the targeted groups.

How a problem is understood can identify the locus of blame, establish parameters for possible solutions and implementation, dictate which groups are involved in the policy process (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994), and define success (Marsh & McConnell, 2010). Social constructions are not static, however, and it follows that a change in problem definition or understanding can shift the social constructions attached to the problem, leading to a change in key policy actors and policy preferences (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015). Thus, problem definition and redefinition is a central struggle in public policy, as any change can alter the power dynamic. By controlling problem definition, policy actors can control the trajectory of the policy process and increase the likelihood of success for preferred alternatives.

Whether a group will be targeted for reward or punishment is most likely due to the valence of their social construction (Stone, 1989) and the specific policy tools chosen are often tied to behavioral assumptions about the target group (Schneider & Ingram, 1990). Negatively constructed, or undeserving, groups are more likely to be the target of coercive, controlling and punitive policy than positively constructed deserving groups (Ingram & Schneider, 2005). Therefore, if political actors are increasingly using conflict rhetoric to target groups for blame,

more groups will be negatively constructed, and the enactment of coercive, controlling, or punitive policies as a way of dealing with the “problem” group is more likely.

Using blame rhetoric to control the policy narrative is an attempt by policy actors to persuade the audience that the message conveyed about the target group is one that should be believed and supported. Fischer (2003) argues that rhetoric can be used by political elites to alleviate concerns and reduce demand for policy responses. If rhetoric can serve to alleviate concerns and reduce policy demand then it should also can create concerns and increase demand for action. Blaming, specifically, can be viewed as a call to action (Hlavacik, 2016; Warner, 2005) seeking to persuade a specific audience as to the cause of the problem (blame target) and appropriate measures to deal with it (Hlavacik, 2016), thus raising support for proposed policies.

One caveat of message persuasion, however, is that it is dependent on the audience believing the content of the message because the persuasive power of a message is related to its credibility (Eisend, 2010; Wilson & Sherrell, 1993). Therefore, based in truth or not, a message perceived as credible is more likely to persuade and enhance support among message recipients than one perceived as non-credible. Negativity in political messages, such as through blaming, may enhance the credibility of the message. Research indicates that negative messages are viewed as more informative and truthful than positive messages (Hilbig, 2009, 2012; Fessler, Pisor & Navarete, 2014), possibly because fear response and risk aversion impulses lead people to focus more on negative than positive information (Lau, 1985). Termed negativity bias, this instinct causes people to spend more time and effort evaluating negative information (Allen & Burrell, 2002; Kanouse & Hanson, 1972; Lau, 1985) and greater evaluative processing efforts can increase message persuasion (Hilbig, 2012; Petty & Brinol, 2008; Tormala, Brinol, & Petty, 2007).

Further, people do not always remember the source of a message over long periods of time (Wathen & Burkell, 2002; Self, 1996; Hovland, Lumsdaine, & Sheffield, 1949; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953), but message source greatly affects message credibility and persuasiveness. Perceived commonalities with the message source (i.e. party affiliation) enhance message credibility (Groeling & Baum, 2008; Calvert, 1985; Crawford & Sobel, 1982; Kydd, 2003), as do message source “matches” with receiver attitudes (Wathen & Burkell, 2002, p. 136), indicating that partisan sources that reinforce a viewer’s attitudes will be more credible to that viewer than those that contradict attitudes. Lipsitz and Geer (2017) demonstrate that perceptions of negativity and fairness in campaign advertising differ substantially by the subject of the message and political affiliation. Co-partisans consistently rated ads supporting their party’s candidate as less negative and fairer than those supporting the opposition. The authors argue that perceptions of truthfulness and fairness should be included in research examining the impact of negative messaging.

Although this discussion primarily focused on the use of blame to target different groups in society, much blame in policy debate involves pointing the finger at the opposing party. This may be a sensible political strategy since voters are more likely to punish politicians for failure than reward them for success (Hood, 2010; Borraz, 2007; James & John, 2007). But, blame as a political strategy is not limited to the opposing party. As suggested by the preceding discussion, politicians often target non-political groups for blame to appeal to group identities and rally support for policy initiatives. Research has yet to explore the disparate impact of politicians purposively blaming opposing parties compared to a non-political group, but it is logical that differing targets of blame would have differential impacts on levels of message and policy support. However, as suggested by the literature, people’s perception of message credibility

should mediate the impact of the message on political support. This research seeks to answer whether, strategically, politicians are better off blaming a non-political group, an opposing party or avoiding a blame message when trying to raise political support. Hypotheses one through four test this relationship:

H1: Variations in blame target will lead to variations in level of message support.

H2: Variations in blame target will lead to variations in level of policy support.

H3: Variations in blame target will lead to variations in perception of message credibility.

H4: Perception of message credibility will mediate the effect of the blame message on message and policy support.

Methodology

To test the impact of differing targets of blame on message and policy support, I conducted an online survey experiment using a diverse sample of the U.S. population. Using a between-subjects 3 x 2 experimental design, participants were randomly assigned to one of six treatment conditions. Each condition consisted of a negative message about the student loan debt crisis. Despite experiments being low in external validity compared to other methods, they are commonly used in research to test the impact of message variation (i.e. framing effects; e.g. Lecheler, Bos, & Vliegenthart, 2015; Nelson, Clawson & Oxley 1997; Smith & Petty, 1996) because experiments “provide the most rigorous way to establish causal relationships between independent and dependent variables” (Thorson, Wicks & Leshner 2012, p. 112). Controlling for confounding variables through randomization allows researchers to attribute any response differences to the experimental manipulation rather than the personal characteristics of respondents, strengthening support for the theoretical underpinnings of significant results.

Sample

Participants were recruited through Qualtrics Panels online survey services. A major criticism of online panels is validity concerns about their use of non-probability samples, especially mismatches between the target population and the sampling frame (Couper, 2000); but, many argue that the chronically low response rates typical of probability sampling via mail or phone raise the same concerns (Brick, 2011). Research indicates that opt-in internet samples are relatively diverse with respect to age, gender, socioeconomic status, and geographic region when compared to samples collected with traditional probability sampling (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastave, & John, 2004) and Qualtrics panels have compared well (Heen, Lieberman & Miethe, 2014). Qualtrics employs an invitation-only recruitment strategy that results in a cross-section more generalizable to the public (Hagtvedt, 2011).

The sample (N=1023) was sixty-four percent white, fifty-one percent female and the average age of participants was 44 ($M=43.6$, $SD=2.64$, range 18-85). Thirty-four percent identified as Republican or republican leaning, and sixty percent identified as conservative. Forty-three percent of participants expected to have student loan debt upon graduation. Detailed respondent characteristics are provided in Table 4.1⁴.

Procedure

All participants answered pretest questions consisting of control variables regarding student loans. Next, participants were exposed to the stimulus condition, a news article excerpt about the student loan debt crisis. Last, participants answered posttest questions regarding message and policy support.

⁴ Table 4.1 and all subsequent tables can be found in Appendix A.

Manipulation

The experimental manipulation was a negative message varying the attribution of blame for the student loan debt crisis (Republican or Democratic Party, universities, and no target of blame) and the political party affiliation of the message sender (Republican or Democratic Party). A message received from a Republican politician either targeted the Democratic Party, targeted universities or contained no target. Likewise, a message received from a Democratic politician either targeted the Republican Party, targeted universities or contained no target. Table 3.2 displays the experimental design. A manipulation test run prior to the full experiment indicated the treatment conditions were successful in alerting participants to the political party affiliation of the message sender and the target of blame. Messages that included a target of blame were worded as follows:

The Federal Reserve released on Wednesday the latest statistics about student loan debt. Over two-thirds of college graduates leave school with some student loan debt. In total, student loan debt has topped \$1.7 trillion and measures more than 6% of overall national debt. More than 11% of student loan borrowers are behind on their payments or in default.

In a series of tweets yesterday, [Democratic/Republican] Representative Brad Young blamed [Republicans/Democrats/Universities] for not doing enough to address the problems of crippling student loan debt and soaring costs that have inflated tuition rates:

Student loan debt is out of control and harming our economy because [Republicans/Democrats/Universities] have pushed disastrous policies that do nothing to lower tuition rates or the debt students are forced to take on. Self-seeking [Republicans/Democrats/Universities] say they care about

inequality, but they keep backing ineffective policies that just make college more expensive.

If we keep listening to [Republicans'/Democrats'//Universities'] dishonest claims, the student loan debt crisis will only get worse and soon higher education will be out of reach for most people.

--Representative Brad Young (@BradYoung) February 10, 2018

Messages with no target of blame were worded:

The Federal Reserve released on Wednesday the latest statistics about student loan debt. Over two-thirds of college graduates leave school with some student loan debt. In total, student loan debt has topped \$1.7 trillion and measures more than 6% of overall national debt. More than 11% of student loan borrowers are behind on their payments or in default.

In a series of tweets yesterday, [Democratic/Republican] Representative Brad Young commented on the effort to address the student loan debt crisis:

Student loan debt is out of control and is harming our economy.

Current policies do nothing to lower tuition rates or the debt students are forced to take on.

We need to work together to put policies in place that fix the problem.

--Representative Brad Young (@BradYoung) February 10, 2018

As a policy issue, the student loan debt crisis is an area where there is some bipartisan agreement that something needs to be done, but disagreement over how to fix the issue (Madison, 2013); there is also evidence of negative economic and social ramifications affecting the U.S. at large due to excessive student loan debt and people's inability to make payments

(Korkki, 2014). While this issue is likely to be highly salient to a portion of the population, it is not an issue that receives constant attention in the press, therefore, it was unlikely many respondents would be well informed on where each party stands on the issue or the details of the debate. This made it more likely that participants did not already have strongly held beliefs about the causes of the student loan crisis or what should be done and, therefore, may be more susceptible to messaging. Additionally, the issue can be conceived of as the result of poor student loan policy and thus blamed on the policies supported by either political party; alternatively, the student loan debt problem can be conceived of as the result of high tuition rates and blamed on universities' policies.

Measures

The dependent variables measured in this study were message and policy support. Both variables were operationalized in multiple parts and each subsequent dimension was treated as a unique dependent variable. Message support was operationalized as people's agreement with the message, their perception of issue importance, and their agreement with the negative characterizations in the message. Policy support was operationalized as demand for policy action and support for policy initiatives. Table 4.2 provides summary statistics of all dependent variable measures.

Message Support. For message agreement and issue importance, participants were asked, "To what extent do you agree or disagree with Representative Young's tweets about the student loan debt crisis?" and "There are many important problems facing our country today. In your opinion, how important or unimportant a problem is the student loan debt crisis?" Respondents answered on 5-point scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree and not at all important to extremely important, respectively. To measure agreement with the negative

characterizations, participants were asked to rate on a 5-point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) their agreement with positive and negative descriptions about universities (Thibodeau, Perko & Flusberg, 2015; Public Agenda; “Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about universities/colleges”):

- Colleges today are mostly interested in making sure students have a good educational experience.
- Colleges today are like most businesses and mainly care about the bottom line.
- Overall, universities have a positive effect on the way things are going in this country.
- Universities don’t care about making college affordable for people.

These items were not sufficiently correlated to justify combining them into one scale variable. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy was 0.55, considered very poor (Beavers, et al., 2013), and reliability was low ($\alpha = 0.63$). As such, each item was tested separately.

Policy Support. Demand for policy action was measured through a proxy question regularly used on the General Social Survey (GSS) to measure public perception of whether the government is spending enough on combating the issue, “We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. Please indicate whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount of money on dealing with the student loan debt crisis.” Following Barry, Brescoll, Brownell, & Schlesinger’s (2009) test of obesity metaphors on policy support, participants were asked to rate on a 5-point scale (strongly oppose to strongly support) four policy initiatives aimed at the student loan debt crisis:

- Allow the government to put a lien on the paychecks of people who fail to make student loan payments.
- Make student loans profit-free for the federal government by eliminating all interest on federal student loans.
- Require universities to pay back all student loan funds they accepted if their former students prove they cannot afford the payments.
- Allow universities to determine the amount students can borrow for student loans.

These items were also insufficiently correlated to justify combining them into one scale variable. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy was 0.50, considered very poor (Beavers, et al., 2013), and reliability was very low ($\alpha = 0.30$). As such, each item was tested separately.

Message Credibility. Following Appelman and Sundar's (2016) three-item message credibility scale, participants were asked, "how well do the following adjectives describe Representative Young's tweets?" Accurate, authentic, and believable were each rated on a 5-point scale (describes very poorly to describes very well). The three items were averaged to create one message credibility score ($\alpha = 0.91$).

Participant Party Alignment with Message Sender and Message Negativity. As indicated in the literature, partisan leaning and perception of message negativity are likely to influence whether participants find the message credible. Therefore, all models controlled for the effects of these two variables. A dichotomous variable indicating whether the participant identified with the message sender's party was created to control for variations due to partisan leanings. Party identification was determined through a two-part question like that used on the General Social

Survey (GSS). Participants who answered independent or neither to “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?” were asked “Do you generally lean toward the Republican or Democratic Party?” Leaners were included in the in-group category along with party identifiers because for many variables related to partisanship leaners indicate stronger preferences than weak partisans (Petrocik, 1974). Opposition identifiers and true independents were included in the outgroup category. Perception of message negativity was measured on a 5-point scale with “In your opinion, how negative or positive was Representative Young’s message?” (Lipsitz & Geer, 2017).

Student Loans and Political Knowledge. To control for any response bias associated with knowledge of the student loan debt crisis or personal experience with student loans, participants were asked: “How familiar or unfamiliar are you with ongoing student loan debt crisis?”; “How much attention do you think the student loan debt crisis is receiving from lawmakers? Would you say it is receiving the right amount of attention, it should receive more attention, it should receive less attention, or are you unsure?”; and “Do you have now or did you have in the past student loan debt?”

All models also included a general measure of political knowledge as a control variable since people who more closely follow politics are more likely to be familiar with what is a credible message associated with each party. Following Delli Carpini and Keeter (1995), participants were asked “Which party held the majority in the U. S. House of Representatives before the 2016 election?”; “Which job or political office is currently held by Mike Pence?”; and “Which party would you say is more conservative?” Answers were added together to create a 4-point index ranging from none correct to all correct.

Results

It is expected that variations in the blame message will lead to variations in message and policy support and that this relationship will be mediated by participants' perception of message credibility. Differences are expected between those who received a blame message targeting an opposing party, a non-political group, and a no blame message. Three dichotomous variables for each comparison were created to test these differences: targeting an opposing party to targeting universities, targeting an opposing party to no target of blame, and targeting universities to no target of blame.

Directs Effects of Blame Targets on Dimensions of Message Support

Step one assessed the impact of variations in blame target on message and policy support. For dimensions of message support, results show that variations in blame target had substantial impact on some, but not all measures. Participants in the blame opposing party condition ($M=3.20$, $SD=1.18$) were significantly less likely to agree with the message than those in the blame universities ($M=3.69$, $SD=0.95$; $b=-0.305$, $p<0.001$) and no blame conditions ($M=3.86$, $SD=1.03$; $b=-0.288$, $p<0.001$). No significant difference in agreement was found between participants in the blame universities and no blame condition. It is interesting to note that people in the no blame conditions exhibited the strongest agreement with the message. Participants in the blame universities conditions ($M=3.63$, $SD=0.93$) considered the student loan debt crisis slightly more important than those no blame conditions ($M=3.58$, $SD=0.95$, $b=0.138$, $p < 0.05$). No significant differences were found comparing the blame opposing party conditions ($M=3.56$, $SD=0.97$) to the other conditions for message importance.

For the last dimension of message agreement, perception of the outgroup, educational experience (item 1) and positive effect (item 3) can be considered viewing colleges and

universities positively, while bottom line (item 2) and making college affordable (item 4) can be considered viewing colleges and universities negatively. From the means displayed in Table 4.3 we can see that across all conditions people agreed more with items 2 and 4 than they did with items 1 and 3, indicating that participants may tend to hold negative rather than positive perceptions of colleges and universities. Additionally, participants in the no blame conditions rated colleges and universities more favorably than participants in the blame universities and blame opposing party conditions. Significant differences were found between the blame universities and no blame conditions for bottom line (item 2; $b=0.202, p<0.025$) and making college affordable (item 4; $b=0.169, p<0.05$). For these two items, people who received the blame universities condition did view colleges and universities less favorably than those who received the no blame condition. A significant difference was also found for bottom line (item 2) between the blame opposing party and no blame conditions ($b=0.194, p<0.05$). For this item, people who received the blame opposing party message viewed colleges and universities more negatively than those in the no blame condition.

These results provide some support for Hypothesis 1. In some instances, variations in the blame target led to variations in the dimensions of message agreement, such that blaming universities led to more negative perceptions of colleges and universities, and greater belief that the issue is important. Blaming universities did not, however, increase message agreement, while blaming the opposing party decreased agreement. Overall, blaming universities appears to be more helpful for building message support than blaming the opposing party, although there also appear to be some benefits to avoiding blame. These results suggest that blame messages require a nuanced strategy for politicians to ensure desired impact.

Direct Effects of Blame Targets on Dimensions of Policy Support

Hypotheses 2 predicted that variations in the blame message would lead to variations in policy support. For the first measure, demand for policy action, people in the blame universities condition ($M=1.95$, $SD=0.88$) exhibited greater demand for action than those in the blame opposing party ($M=1.88$, $SD=0.89$) and no blame ($M=1.88$, $SD=0.87$) conditions. However, the differences between the conditions were not significant.

Looking at support for punitive policy, policy 1 (lien on paychecks) would help the government and harm students, policy 2 (eliminate interest on loans) would harm the government and help students, policy 3 (universities pay back student loan funds) would harm universities and help students, while policy 4 (university decide amount of loans for students) would help universities and potentially harm students. Table 4.4 outlines the mean support for each policy rated.

Overall, participants were most supportive of the policies that harmed the government (policy 2) and universities (policy 3). Surprisingly, however, the mean response for policy 2 was highest in the blame universities conditions and lowest in the blame opposing parties condition, while support for policy 3 was highest in the blame opposing party conditions. Significant differences were found between the blame opposing parties and no blame conditions for policy 1 (lien on paychecks; $b= 0.216$, $p<0.05$), policy 3 (universities pay back student loan funds; $b= 0.220$, $p<0.025$) and policy 4 (universities decide amount of loans; $b= 0.211$, $p<0.05$). No other significant results were found.

These results show some support for Hypothesis 2. Variations in blame did effect support for punitive policies against an outgroup, although not in expected ways. Those in the blame opposing party conditions were supportive of punitive policies against universities (policy

3) and students (policies 1 and 4), but not the government. This may be indicative that participants did not believe the message that a political party should be held responsible, but still felt someone should be blamed. However, those in the blame universities condition did support punitive policies against the government (policy 2; $b= 0.153, p=0.056$) and universities (policy 3, $b= 0.166, p=0.075$) more than those in the no blame conditions. Although these results are not significant at the 95% confidence level, they trend in the expected direction, especially if policy 2 is construed as helping students.

Direct Effects of Blame Target on Message Credibility

Mean comparisons show variations in blame target did lead to variations in perception of message credibility (H3). People in the no blame conditions ($M=3.75, SD=0.86$) rated message credibility higher than those in the blame opposing party ($M=3.18, SD=1.09$) and blame universities conditions ($M=3.58, SD=0.84$). However, significant differences were found only between the blame opposing party and no blame conditions ($b= -0.139, p<0.05$) and the blame opposing party and blame universities conditions ($b= -0.198, p<0.001$). No significant difference in message credibility was found between the blame universities and no blame conditions. As indicated by the research, participant party alignment with the message sender should impact perception of message credibility and this is indeed the case. Overall, participants who identified with the message sender's party consistently rated the message more credible ($M=3.76, SD=0.83$) than those who did not align with the message sender's party ($M=3.30, SD=1.02; t(1021) = -7.695, p<0.001$). Figure 4.1⁵ illustrates perception of message credibility by condition and participant and message sender party alignment.

⁵ Figure 4.1 can be found in Appendix B.

Mediation Analysis

Hypothesis 4 predicted that perception of message credibility will mediate the effect of varying targets of blame on dimensions of message and policy support. Mediation was assessed per treatment comparison. Table 4.5 displays results for dependent variable measures where mediation was significant. For message agreement, results show that when comparing the impact of the blame opposing party conditions to the blame universities ($b=-0.086, p=0.03$) and no blame ($b=-0.134, p=0.001$) conditions, the indirect effects of the treatment through message credibility were significant and partial mediation occurred. The variation in perception of message credibility due to treatment conditions mediated 44% and 30% of the impact of the variation in blame on message agreement, respectively. No other direct mediation effects were found.

As shown in Table 4.5, however, results indicate that in some instances message credibility acted as a suppressor variable to magnify the importance of the variation in blame on message and policy support. A suppressor variable strengthens the relationship between the dependent and independent variable by reducing the model error variance (Ludlow & Klein, 2014). This relationship is also termed *inconsistent mediation* (MacKinnon, Krull, & Lockwood, 2000). Message credibility strengthened the differential impact of the varying targets of blame on issue importance; bottom line (perception item 2); lien on paychecks (policy 1); universities pay back loan funds (policy 3); and universities decide amount to borrow (policy 4) when comparing the blame opposing party to no blame conditions. Comparing the no blame to blame universities condition, message credibility strengthened the differential impact for bottom line (perception item 2); make college affordable (perception item 4); and eliminate interest on student loans (policy 2). These results indicate that while credibility may not directly mediate

the impact of variations in blame on many measures of message and policy support, it is an important endogenous variable that should be taken in account.

Discussion

This research presented a framework within which to understand the strategic use of negative messaging in political communication. Mediatization theory suggests that politicians engage in negative attacks because they have learned that the media and the public pay more attention to negative over positive messages. Additionally, as suggested by social identity and social construction theory, attacks against different groups are politically effective because they can heighten social group differences, increase negative affect for the attacked groups, and rally political and policy support among in-group members. It is likely, however, that the effect of these messages is mediated by people's perception of message credibility.

The results of this experiment show that message credibility may not always be a direct mediator between political rhetoric and political support, but it is an important factor that can influence the impact of variations in negative messaging. Overall, participants found the blame opposing party messages to be much less credible than the blame universities and no blame messages. This reflects partisan leanings, but also, perhaps, is an indication that people perceive negative attacks on political parties as a political ploy rather than a message to be seriously considered. That people in the blame opposing party conditions were the least likely to agree with the message supports this interpretation and may be a marker of the identified trend that people don't particularly like attack messages (Geer, 2006; Bartels, 2000; Brooks, 2000). Further, people in the no blame conditions were the most likely to agree with the message, which indicates that people respond more positively to messages that do not contain an attack. These

results support Lipsitz and Geer's (2017) assertion that it is important to consider message credibility when studying the effects of negative messages.

The direct effects of variations in blame indicate that blaming non-political groups can be effective at increasing negative perceptions of outgroups. Overall, participants in the blame universities conditions exhibited the most negative perceptions of colleges and universities, and compared to those in the no blame conditions, considered the issue more important and were more supportive of policy punishing universities. Further analysis revealed that for three out of four perception measures, the more negatively participants' perceived universities and colleges, the more likely they were to support that universities be required to repay student loan funds (item 1: $b = -0.063, p < 0.05$; item 2: $b = 0.208, p < 0.001$; item 4: $b = 0.252, p < 0.001$).

Additionally, those in the blame universities condition were the most supportive of eliminating interest on student loans, which would hurt the government, but also help students.

Surprisingly, compared to the other conditions those in the blame opposing party conditions were significantly more supportive of all the policies except eliminating interest on student loans. It could be that despite the lack of credibility, blaming the opposing party raised awareness of the issue and the inclination that something should be done. Alternatively, this could be an indication of attribution of blame, whereby participants were less likely to support a policy they perceived as helping people that chose to take on these debts. Additionally, compared to those in the no blame conditions, participants who received a blame opposing party message had much more negative perceptions of universities. While overall, participants appeared to hold negative perceptions of universities regardless of treatment group, this may be indicative that the additional negative feelings aroused by the blame message carried over to

influence participants' perceptions of universities. Such carryover effects have been identified in studies of emotional arousal (e.g. Lerner & Keltner, 2000).

Across measures of message and policy support, the results of this research were inconsistent. Nevertheless, predicted by the research framework, the results do indicate that conflict rhetoric can lead to more negative perceptions of attacked groups and more willingness to support punitive policy against the groups. If politicians are using blame messages with the intention of manipulating perceptions of the blame target to raise support for punitive policies, these results suggest that it can be a successful strategy. These results also bode ill for the long-term political impact of much attack messaging as blaming the opposing party may harm credibility and levels of message support.

Limitations

A major limitation of this study is the use of student loans as the policy issue. While it is an issue that is gaining more and more attention in the media, it may not elicit reactions as strong as some more salient and emotionally charged issues (i.e. immigration or terrorism). Further, while the results indicate that, overall, universities are not perceived positively, they may not be a group as readily identified as an outgroup in the same way that definable social groups are (i.e. immigrants or Muslims). As the 2016 election made plain, Donald Trump gained more traction denigrating immigrants and Muslims than Bernie Sanders did denigrating big banks. It is possible that with identifying a more emotionally charged outgroup, results would have been more pronounced. Additionally, looking at just one policy limits the generalizability of the results to other policy areas.

It was unknown who participants felt is responsible for the student loan crisis. It is very possible that people may view students with large amounts of student loan debt as more

responsible than political parties or universities. Further, the treatment groups did not provide a blame target that could be construed as personally responsible. Universities and political parties are institutions rather than a social group that would have provided a hypothetical figure to which individual responsibility could have been attributed (i.e. an individual that took on student loan debt). Studies of obesity policy have shown that perceptions of personal responsibility can impact support for policy initiatives (Barry, Brescoll, Brownell, & Schlesinger, 2009). A similar effect may have occurred here. The study as designed did not allow for the blaming of students to be taken in to account.

Conclusion

There are many groups that would likely inspire more intense negative reactions in the populace than did universities. That a relatively tame attack message against an institution would still elicit discernible reactions, however, is noteworthy. It is also cause for concern. Public policy provides benefits to or imposes punishments on different groups in society and through the rhetoric used by political actors, we can detect which groups they believe should bear the burdens and which should reap the rewards of government action. Groups that can be identified in the people we see in public every day more easily become targets than faceless entities with whom we cannot or do not interact.

The negative stereotypes attached to some social constructions are created through the differentiation of the “other.” Therefore, using conflict rhetoric to target a group for blame increases the likelihood that the group will be perceived as negatively constructed. It is these negatively constructed groups that will most likely be the losers in public policy, receiving punishment rather than reward (Schneider & Ingram, 1997) because the behavior of negatively constructed groups is more likely to be considered deviant and in need of controlling. With the

cover of public support raised in response to blame messages, politicians can enact punitive policies against the targeted groups and take credit for policy action.

Thus, the impact mediatization has had on elite rhetorical style matters because if political actors are increasingly using conflict rhetoric to target groups to blame, more groups are likely to be negatively constructed and therefore subject to coercive, controlling or punitive policy. As a result, policy outcomes are less likely to be successful because punitive and coercive policies often fail to produce compliance or lasting change (Moller, Ryan, & Deci, 2006), but succeed in reinforcing inequities (Sidel, 2000; Soss, 2005). For example, if universities were penalized when their graduates failed to pay student loans, it is very likely that in response universities would minimize the number of students they accept who need to take large amounts of loans to attend. The result would likely reinforce the higher education system as one that is increasingly out of reach for any but the wealthy.

Public policy shapes and institutionalizes norms of treatment for different social groups and, historically, these norms have had important economic repercussions for marginalized and disadvantaged groups that persist today. No policy exists in a vacuum; instead, it is heavily influenced by previous policy, entrenched behavioral norms, the current social and political contexts, and our evolving relationship with history. Today, the tension between economic and social policy is especially severe and is driving the widening ideological rift we are currently experiencing. The current emphasis on “identity” and “grievance” politics is merely a symptom of this underlying tension. In such antagonistic and divisive cultures,

Public policy is not a means of solving problems or even resolving conflicts among competing perspectives, but is instead an instrument of power that can be used opportunistically by each faction to further its own legitimacy,

popularity, or future power positions (Schneider & Ingram, 1997, p. 105).

Policymakers create political messages to generate support for policy initiatives, but the rhetoric they choose to promote their preferred solutions betrays which groups they favor and believe should be the winners and losers in public policy. That conflict rhetoric may lead to policy failure is important to recognize because the mediatization of politics makes it unlikely that this negative discourse will abate anytime soon. Understanding how language and rhetoric constructs groups and constrains policy choices can help policy experts overcome these parameters to develop more effective policy.

CHAPTER 5

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES: WHY ATTACK RHETORIC MAY BE BAD FOR DEMOCRACY

Introduction

Since Donald Trump's campaign for the Republican Party presidential nomination, an abundance of political news, commentary, and analysis has focused on his tendency toward incendiary speech during political rallies, formal addresses, and, especially, on twitter. People across the political spectrum have opined on whether and how his rhetoric compares to autocratic rulers (e.g. McNeill, 2016; Buric, 2016; J.P.P., 2016) and many have displayed a palpable fear that his use of such speech as a political weapon may lead the United States away from democracy (e.g. Faris, 2017; Lanktree, 2018; Collinson, 2018). Perhaps not coincidentally, some recent research has focused on a seeming decline in support for democratic governance and values, particularly among younger generations (e.g. Ellis, 2017; Wike, 2016). Overall support for democracy is still high, but many people appear open to other, less democratic forms of government (Wike, Simmons, Stokes, & Fetterolf, 2017). This trend is not unique to the United States and is, perhaps, a factor in the elections of and political support for populist figures such as Donald Trump, Rodrigo Duterte, and Marine Le Pen (Foa & Mounk, 2017).

A possible explanation in the weakening support for democracy is a greater acceptance of antisocial behavior among certain segments of the population indicating a shift in perceived behavioral norms (Howe, 2017). While Howe (2017) specifically discusses illegal behavior such as accepting bribes and cheating on taxes, New York Times columnist Thomas Edsall (2017) suggested that a new tolerance for violations of the norms of political discourse, specifically the unprecedented incivility in political rhetoric, may be the culprit. As research studying the rise and fall of democracies has shown, adherence to norms such as civility in political discourse matter. Through the slow erosion of social and political norms, democratic deconsolidation can occur with the willing support of lawmakers and the public (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). The

specter of a Trump-led descent into fascism may be a valid concern, and it certainly makes for sensational news fodder, but the important question is whether the conflict-laden rhetoric so embraced by politicians is helping to create conditions that will allow this to happen.

The power of rhetoric as a persuasive tool lay in its ability to “engage and transform emotions” in the audience (Kastely, 2004, p. 222; Gorgias, 1972) and intense emotional arousal may be the connection between political messages and the activation of political support. Emotions have been shown to influence vote choice (e.g. Marcus & MacKuen, 1993; Redlawsk, Civettini & Lau, 2007), willingness to participate (e.g. Groenendyk, 2011; Valentino, Gregorowicz & Groenendyk, 2011), levels of partisanship (e.g. Weeks, 2015), likelihood of activism (e.g. Roser & Thompson, 1995), and attitude change (e.g. Smith, 2014; O’Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009). Yet, little research explores the impact emotions have on some of the more nebulous aspects of political support, such as for democratic values and institutions. Using an original experiment this research explores how the different emotions “engaged and transformed” by conflict rhetoric impact democratic support. Results show that the emotions elicited through conflict rhetoric do impact levels of democratic support in both positive and negative ways.

Appealing to Emotions with Political Rhetoric

In the struggle to exert influence, rhetoric is central to creating political images for public consumption and evaluation. Rhetoric is a key component at every stage of political debate because it is where “ideas are fashioned into arguments with a certain force and direction in order to win the assent of an audience” (Martin, 2014, p. 9). It is through rhetoric that politicians and other political actors most directly attempt to persuade the public to hold certain viewpoints. Thus, political rhetoric is purposive action meant to manipulate the perceptions and attitudes of

message receivers with the aim of garnering electoral and legislative support.

The term conflict rhetoric is used broadly here to refer to political rhetoric employed with the intent of highlighting differences between, and creating opposition to, people, groups, or ideas. The purpose of this rhetorical strategy, often accomplished through attacks and denigration of out-group members, is to activate group allegiance among message receivers to bolster political support. It can be classified under what Dryzek (2010) terms bonding rhetoric, or rhetoric meant to mobilize groups through shared identity, interests, or values. Bonding rhetoric can be beneficial to society because it can help weak or fragmented groups find a stronger unified voice with which to participate in democratic debate and bring attention to new or underrepresented viewpoints (Dryzek, 2010). Such rhetoric is not new to politics, but, as Edsall (2017) argues, conventional norms keeping political discourse within the bounds of truth and good taste seem to have been abandoned. It is this move into what Dryzek (2010) termed “ugly rhetoric” (p. 333) that presents problems. While bonding rhetoric can promote deliberative democracy through its ability to cohere and strengthen previously fragmented voices, ugly rhetoric can derail deliberative systems through its attempts at manipulation and misdirection.

The negative versions of conflict rhetoric manifest in political discourse in a variety of forms, including campaign attack advertising, partisan rhetoric, outrage discourse, and blame. Blame is an especially useful political strategy because it allows politicians and political parties to simultaneously deflect fault for problems and rally support for preferred policy solutions. The most obvious target for blame in politics is an opposing party. Strategically, this conflict messaging is necessary if political actors are to convince voters to prefer one party over the other (Lee, 2016). But, political blame is not limited to opposing parties or their members. These types of criticisms can include people, groups, and entities in and outside of government (Hood,

2010). Recent examples include Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT) blaming big banks for much of the economic and societal woes in the U.S. (McAuliff, 2015), Donald Trump blaming Mexicans for drug and crime problems (Deggins, 2015; Gabbatt, 2015), and Governor Chris Christie (R-NJ) blaming universities for unmanageable student loan debt (Haddon, 2015). Such messages reduce complex social or economic issues to a matter of group dynamics and provide an object from which to exact retribution.

In rhetorical strategy, the blame target is used to persuade an audience to a specific viewpoint (Hlavacik, 2016; Burke, 1969). Thus, the target object is only important in relation to the who constitutes the audience. Appealing to social group tensions through blame can be beneficial because political debate often centers on which groups deserve to benefit from government largesse. It is a simple rhetorical act to portray one group's benefiting as a threat to another group's status. Such arguments are meant to orient the audience to a topic or event through emotional arousal (Martin, 2016) and the "us versus them" dynamic inherent in blame messages direct where the target audience should aim their anger, fear, and frustration about current problems. That rhetoric attempts to persuade through emotional appeals is an early insight (Kastely, 2004), but blame is potentially pernicious because it can be an "extreme rhetorical act" (Hlavacik, 2016, p. 162) that aims to divide groups through the arousal of specifically negative emotions. Blame highlights what should be feared and its target is a rhetorical prop designed to serve the message sender's intention to create divisions in society in order to build support among certain groups.

Politics is, by definition, about group conflict and blaming is sound political strategy because it is designed to create inter-group tensions and promote "us versus them" narratives to pit one group against another. Blaming can be conceived of as a form of misinformation

intentionally deployed to distract from factual contexts in political debate. It is an effective strategy for evading responsibility for governing failures because “voters are more sensitive to what has been done *to* them than what has been done *for* them” (italics in original; Weaver, 1986, p. 373). By identifying a culprit to scapegoat for social ills, “a smokescreen [designed] to divert attention from strategic political actions or challenges” (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017, p. 364) is created. Rhetoric is “where political meanings are negotiated” (Beasley, 2001, p. 24) and blaming affords politicians the opportunity to simplify complex social problems to neatly packaged tropes that can influence political support. As a political tool, blaming conveniently identifies a visible cause of an issue without the inconvenience of identifying and addressing all factors that may have contributed to problem development.

Through its claim to be based on “some truth or genuine viewpoint,” the biased interpretation of social problems inherent in much misinformation, such as blame messages, may have greater capacity to influence public opinion than does demonstrably false information (Webb & Jirotko, 2017, p. 415). Targeting a group for blame allows political actors to appear to be responsive to policy issues important to their constituencies and reassure them that someone is attentive to their plight. But, these storylines diminish the power of factual knowledge as group-based beliefs and emotions hold sway (Fischer, 2003). When groups hold antagonistic and negative views of others, policy becomes a means to stave off threats to group status and ensure continued dominance by the powerful, rather than an effort to work toward the common good (Schneider & Ingram, 1997).

Blame is “ugly rhetoric” because, through scapegoating, it simplifies the cause of a social problem to a visible symbol at which the afflicted can direct their frustration, anger, and anxiety. In such situations, people are less likely to sympathize with or listen to opposing viewpoints

(Hart & Nisbett, 2012), thus inhibiting “further deliberation by closing down dissent or prejudging the opinions of others, thereby eliminating the need to engage them in dialogue” (Martin, 2014, p. 112). Blaming fails to live up to the goals of deliberative democracy because it is rhetoric that strategically uses others as a means to an end rather than encouraging understanding and cooperation between differing viewpoints (Martin, 2014; Young, 2002). As such, the accuracy or fairness of the blame message is inconsequential to its use as a rhetorical strategy to influence the target audience (Hlavacik, 2016).

With blatant appeals to group-based emotions, conflict rhetoric situates the target audience in relation to matters of controversy (Martin, 2014), whether real or manufactured. The brilliance of a blame strategy, however, is that the group membership of the audience at which the blame appeal is directed doesn't need to be explicitly defined in the message because appealing to a conscious sense of belonging isn't necessary to activate emotions against an out-group (Mackie & Smith, 2017). Group identities are easily constructed and manipulated through rhetoric (Beasley, 2001) because they are based on perceived rather than formal belonging (Greene, 1999). In fact, the use of subtle priming or cues in political messaging is sufficient to activate group identities (Seger, Smith, & Mackie, 2009). As such, political actors can appeal to group memberships indirectly by using conflict to create an outgroup against which to unite. Thus, the perceived threat to group status highlighted through the blame appeal should easily activate both a sense of group identity and the negative appraisal of an outgroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) even in cases where individuals do not directly identify as a member of a specific in-group (Iyer & Leach, 2008). In other words, blame is effective at instigating intergroup dynamics because a conscious awareness of group identity is not necessary for the blame target to be perceived as a threat. Blaming works not because it unifies fragmented voices, but rather,

because it identifies for the audience an “other” to unite against. The purpose of this “ugly rhetoric” is to create a distraction that captures negative attention and inhibits thoughtful deliberation and compromise, thus dividing groups through the perception of conflict.

Rhetoric works through the unconscious activation of subjective perceptions orienting the audience emotionally by degrees toward an object to influence reasoning in specific ways (Martin, 2014). As such, attitudinal and behavioral responses from the audience should depend upon which emotions are activated (Iyer & Leach, 2008; Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989). Research has shown that positive frames are more successful at eliciting positive emotions and opinions than negative emotions, and vice versa (Lecheler, Bos, & Vliegenthart, 2015) and in a political context different emotions lead to different cognitive and behavioral responses. For example, messages which elicit enthusiasm or anger about a candidate are more likely to motivate people to become politically involved, but also promote knee-jerk partisan reactions and motivated reasoning (Marcus & MacKuen, 1993; Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz, & Hutchings, 2011; Groenendyk, 2011; Weeks, 2015). Anxiety, on the other hand, promotes information seeking and thoughtful processing (Johnston, Lavine, & Woodson, 2015; Marcus, 2002; Brader, 2005; Brader, Marcus, & Miller, 2011) and may increase the likelihood that people will share the fear-inducing message (Boehmer & Friedman, 2015). But, in some circumstance anxiety can also demobilize voters (Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz, & Hutchings, 2011). As a rhetorical tool, blaming is often used to induce anger which can trigger group-based hatred and spur action (Groenendyk, 2011). It is not surprising then that strong partisans are more likely to be mobilized by campaign negativity than weaker partisans (Wolf, Strachan, & Shea, 2012).

A savvy political actor or group can use rhetoric to stifle or arouse specific emotions in

order to focus support and dissuade dissent (Moisander, Hirsto, & Fahy, 2016). However, for effective results such rhetorical strategies require skill and finesse in execution because desired reactions are never guaranteed. For example, rhetoric induced disgust has been shown to lead to less support for gay rights, but, also increased support among message receivers who reacted in anger against the derogatory nature of the message (Gadarian & van der Vort, 2014). This backlash effect may be due to greater identification with a super-ordinate category that includes the out-group targeted (Iyer & Leach, 2008; Yzerbyt, Dumont, Wigboldus, & Gordijn, 2003) or to concern for the out-group's disadvantage (Van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer & Leach, 2004) as signified in the attack. Similarly, in-group members that experience shame or guilt at their group's action have been shown to exhibit lower levels of group attachment (Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007), which suggests that rhetoric meant to activate negative reactions toward outgroups may drive some in-group members away due to a backlash effect against the undesirable in-group behavior. This may explain the unexpected results in article one of this dissertation.

As political strategy, conflict messages are designed to elicit group level reactions to rally support for specific political actors, groups, or ideas. It is not surprising then that research studying conflict rhetoric has focused primarily on its impact on micro- and meso-level political support, or what Dalton (1999) classified as political authorities and institutions (see Table 2.1 for Dalton's typology of political support). That is, its impact on support for and perception of individual politicians (e.g. Garramone, 1985; Fridkin & Kenney, 2004; Malloy & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2016), policy preferences (e.g. Koch, 1998; Jorgensen, Song, & Jones, 2017), and political parties and institutions (e.g. Ramirez, 2009; Morris & Witting, 2001; Harbridge & Malhotra, 2011). Likewise, research examining the effects of emotions in politics has focused

on micro- and meso-level support and behaviors. Little research directly examines the impact of conflict rhetoric or emotions on macro-level political support, or what Dalton described as political processes, principles, and communities. There are indications, however, that the effect is not necessarily positive and concern is warranted.

Research tracking the use of conflict rhetoric in politics indicates that its use is steadily increasing. The frequency of negative attacks fluctuates with each campaign, but the trend over time has been an unequivocal increase, with the 2012 and 2016 presidential campaigns being the most negative on record (Franklin-Fowler, Ridout, & Franz, 2016). Outside of the campaign context, research studying negativity in policy debate (Grimmer, 2013) and the use of conflict in political strategy (Lee, 2016) also indicate a steadily increasing use of the various forms of conflict rhetoric in the political and policy arenas. At the same time support for democratic governance and values appears to be decreasing, especially among younger generations.

In 2011, 24 percent (an all-time high) of young Americans agreed that democracy is a bad or very bad way of running this country (Foa & Mounk, 2017) and the number of Americans that agree it is essential to live in a country that is governed democratically drops dramatically as age decreases (Foa & Mounk, 2016). A variety of surveys (e.g. Poushter, 2015; Bucknell, 2017; Villasenor, 2017; Frankovich, 2017), report that college students support the ideal of free speech, but when asked about specific forms (i.e. offensive costumes, expressions of radical ideas), exceptions begin to emerge (Ellis, 2017; Wike, 2016). Similarly, support for democracy is still high, but many people are open to other, less democratic forms of government (Wike, Simmons, Stokes, & Fetterolf, 2017). For example, the number of U.S. citizens who think that army rule may be a good or very good idea has increased from 1 in 16 in 1995 to 1 in 6 in 2014 (Foa & Mounk, 2016). These trends may be coincidental, and are certainly the product of many factors,

but they do suggest that there are less than desirable long-term consequences to the increasingly normalized atmosphere of open political hostility. The data collected for this research reveals similar patterns for democratic support by age group. Table 5.1⁶ illustrates that democratic support as measured by the willingness to limit free speech, belief that civil rights are important, and the Democracy/Autocracy Index is lower among younger age groups.

The extensive research on conflict rhetoric also provides some indication that it harms attitudes important to a healthy democracy. Negative advertising decreases feelings of efficacy (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007), which likely impacts voter turnout and faith in democratic processes. Campaign negativity decreases trust in government (Lau et al., 2007), which has been steadily declining since the late 1950's (Pew, 2017), as instances of conflict rhetoric have increased. Strategically, highlighting party conflict in political messaging has increased in importance as margins of victory for majority control have narrowed (Lee, 2016), but the increased party conflict has been linked to decreased confidence in and support for Congress (Harbridge & Malhotra, 2011; Ramirez, 2009; Morris & Witting, 2001), suggesting a vicious cycle. Conflict rhetoric appears to negatively impact attitudes towards governmental institutions. However, for as long as politicians and political operatives continue to believe these attacks work (Fridkin & Kenney, 2008), it is unlikely political discourse will change.

With negative advertising, negative political reporting, negatively focused opinion programming, and now attacks via social media, citizens are continually bombarded with messages designed to outrage or frighten. This “ugly rhetoric” aims to divide groups, shut down

⁶ Table 5.1 and all subsequent tables can be found in Appendix A.

dissent, and derail productive deliberation through the arousal of intense negative emotions. More alarming, however, is the possibility that negative emotional arousal due to exposure to conflict rhetoric can have implications beyond intergroup dynamics to affect macro-level political support. Researchers have long known that engaging in political attacks is a risky strategy that can induce a backlash against the message sender (Damore, 2002; Dowling & Wichovsky, 2015; Hale, Fox & Farmer, 1996; Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Peterson & Djupe, 2005; Theilmann & Wilhite, 1998; Fridkin & Kenney, 2004; Banda & Windett, 2016), but it may also cause harm to the political system through the detrimental effects of continued negative arousal from manipulation, propaganda, and promotional self-interest (Martin, 2014; Dryzek, 2000).

Recently, studies of democratic deconsolidation have linked support for populist movements to rhetoric designed to elicit fear and anger. Enflamed through relentless messaging, populist support likely derives from a sense of shame at (potential) loss of social standing transforming over time into anger at an outgroup (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017) and the level of anger individuals feel about economic crises (Rico, Guinjoan, & Anduza, 2017). Furthermore, repeated appeals to outrage designed to drive political divisions may, over time, evolve into disgust with the system that produces the rhetoric, leading to loss of support for the system (DeBell, 2016). Indeed, emotions activated in response to one event can orient thoughts to other events (Lerner & Keltner, 2000), because emotional arousal can induce spillover effects for judgments of other related and unrelated situations. Eliciting negative reactions through conflict rhetoric may produce short-term electoral support for political candidates and parties, but, due to the spillover effects of emotional arousal it may, in the long-term, be detrimental to popular support for democracy. As suggested by Thomas Edsall (2017), it is possible that the long-term negative repercussions of political attacks may reverberate beyond the impact on the message

sender and the target of the attack to the entire political system by weakening support for democratic governance and values.

Yet despite the laments of the downward spiral in political civility, not all evidence points to negative repercussions. In the U.S., research looking at data through 2008 indicates that markers of satisfaction with government improved (Aldrich, 2013) as political rhetoric devolved. Leading up to 2008, perceptions that public officials care what the public thinks and that the government listens to the people increased over time, while a majority of people reported being satisfied with democracy. This is possibly due to the fact that the electorate clearly perceives the increases in party polarization (Aldrich, 2013), as demonstrated through party cues in conflict rhetoric, and can better align their own preferences and cast the “right” vote (i.e. voting for the party with aligned issue positions; Levendusky, 2010; Hetherington, 2001). As previously mentioned, blame is a rhetorical strategy used in part to convince people that political actors are responsive to their problems, which may elicit enthusiasm, hope, or schadenfreude rather than anger or fear. It is possible that conflict rhetoric activates emotions in some people that may reinforce faith in democratic processes or at least continued support for the system.

Research in American politics has yet to directly investigate the impact of conflict rhetoric on democratic support. Given what is now known about the temporal precedence of affective responses to cognitive appraisals, beliefs, and actions (see Marcus, 2013), it is likely that any impact will be subject to the emotions activated by the message. As such, the current study seeks to add to the literature by addressing whether the emotions aroused through “ugly rhetoric” enhance or diminish support for the broad constructs that should bind Americans together as a nation, such as belief in democratic governance, principles, and institutions. Through an experiment designed to test the effects of strategically placed blame, this research

investigates whether the arousal of negative emotions caused by conflict rhetoric is contributing to the decline in measures of democratic support. The following hypotheses will be tested:

H1: Variations in the attribution of blame will lead to variations in emotional arousal such that a blame message will arouse more negative emotions than a no blame message and a no blame message will arouse more positive emotions than a blame message.

H2: Variations in emotional arousal will lead to variations in democratic support such that the arousal of positive emotions will lead to greater support and the arousal of negative emotions will lead to lesser support.

H3: Emotions function as an indirect mediator for the effect of variations in blame on democratic support.

Methodology

The results reported are from data collected through an online survey experiment using a varied sample of American citizens. Using a between-subjects 3 x 2 experimental design, participants were randomly assigned to one of six treatment conditions. Each condition consisted of a negative message about student loan debt reform. Despite experiments being low in external validity compared to other methods, they are commonly used in research to test the impact of message variation (i.e. framing effects; e.g. Lecheler, Bos, & Vliegenthart, 2015; Nelson, Clawson & Oxley 1997; Smith & Petty, 1996) because experiments “provide the most rigorous way to establish causal relationships between independent and dependent variables” (Thorson, Wicks & Leshner 2012, p. 112). Experiments are also well-suited to elicit emotional responses, as discrete emotions arise in response to events and prevailing situations (Angie, Connelly, Waples, & Kligyte, 2011; Frijda, 1986).

Sample

Participants were recruited through Qualtrics Panels online survey services. A major criticism of online panels is that the samples are non-probability and thus raise validity concerns, especially mismatches between the target population and the sampling frame (Couper, 2000); but, many argue that the chronically low response rates typical of probability sampling via mail or phone raise the same concerns (Brick, 2011). Research indicates that opt-in internet samples are relatively diverse with respect to age, gender, socioeconomic status, and geographic region when compared to samples collected with traditional probability sampling (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastave, & John, 2004) and Qualtrics panels have compared well (Heen, Lieberman & Miethe, 2014). Qualtrics employs an invitation-only recruitment strategy that results in a cross-section more generalizable to the public (Hagtvedt, 2011).

The sample (N=1023) was sixty-four percent white, fifty-one percent female and the average age of participants was 44 ($M=43.6$, $SD=2.64$, range 18-85). Thirty-four percent identified as Republican or republican leaning, and sixty percent identified as conservative. Forty-three percent of participants expected to have student loan debt upon graduation. Detailed respondent characteristics are provided in Table 4.1.

Procedure

All participants answered questions regarding their experience with student loans and familiarity with the debt crisis. Next, participants were exposed to the stimulus condition, a news article excerpt about the student loan debt crisis. Last, participants answered questions measuring their level of emotional arousal and democratic support.

Manipulation

The experimental manipulation was a negative message about the student loan debt crisis varying the attribution of blame (Republican or Democratic Party, universities, and no target of blame) and the political party affiliation of the message sender (Republican or Democratic Party). A message received from a Republican politician either targeted the Democratic Party, targeted universities or contained no target. Likewise, a message received from a Democratic politician either targeted the Republican Party, targeted universities or contained no target. Table 3.2 displays the experimental design. A manipulation test run prior to the full experiment indicated the treatment conditions were successful in alerting participants to the attribution of blame and the political party affiliation of the message sender and blame target. Messages that included a target of blame were worded as follows:

The Federal Reserve released on Wednesday the latest statistics about student loan debt. Over two-thirds of college graduates leave school with some student loan debt. In total, student loan debt has topped \$1.7 trillion and measures more than 6% of overall national debt. More than 11% of student loan borrowers are behind on their payments or in default.

In a series of tweets yesterday, [Democratic/Republican] Representative Brad Young blamed [Republicans/Democrats/Universities] for not doing enough to address the problems of crippling student loan debt and soaring costs that have inflated tuition rates:

Student loan debt is out of control and harming our economy because [Republicans/Democrats/Universities] have pushed disastrous policies that do nothing to lower tuition rates or the debt students are forced to take on.

Self-seeking [Republicans/Democrats/Universities] say they care about inequality, but they keep backing ineffective policies that just make college more expensive.

If we keep listening to [Republicans'/Democrats'//Universities'] dishonest claims, the student loan debt crisis will only get worse and soon higher education will be out of reach for most people.

--Representative Brad Young (@BradYoung) February 10, 2018

Messages with no target of blame were worded:

The Federal Reserve released on Wednesday the latest statistics about student loan debt. Over two-thirds of college graduates leave school with some student loan debt. In total, student loan debt has topped \$1.7 trillion and measures more than 6% of overall national debt. More than 11% of student loan borrowers are behind on their payments or in default.

In a series of tweets yesterday, [Democratic/Republican] Representative Brad Young commented on the effort to address the student loan debt crisis:

Student loan debt is out of control and is harming our economy.

Current policies do nothing to lower tuition rates or the debt students are forced to take on.

We need to work together to put policies in place that fix the problem.

--Representative Brad Young (@BradYoung) February 10, 2018

While the student loan debt crisis as a policy issue is likely to be highly salient to a portion of the population, it is not an issue that receives constant attention in the press, therefore, it was unlikely many respondents would be well informed on where each party stands on the

issue or the details of the debate. This made it more likely that this is not an issue about which people already held strong beliefs or were emotionally charged and, therefore, participants were likely to be more susceptible to emotional manipulation through messaging. Additionally, the issue can be conceived of as the result of poor student loan policy and thus blamed on the policies supported by either political party; alternatively, the student loan debt problem can be conceived of as the result of high tuition rates and blamed on universities' policies.

Measures

This research tests the effects of blaming on people's attitudes toward democracy and the political system, termed here democratic support. As defined by Dalton (1999), one level of political support can be measured through attitudes toward the political regime. This includes latent orientations such as trust in government and belief in democratic governance and values. Democratic support, consists of three dimensions: trust in institutions, support for democratic governance and values, and satisfaction with the democratic system. Each dimension was operationalized in multiple parts, described below, and each subsequent measure was treated as a unique dependent variable. Table 5.2 provides summary statistics of all dependent variable measures.

Trust in Government. Participants rated their trust in the government in Washington, DC, the Republican and Democratic parties, and Congress with a question from the New Democracy Barometer developed by Mishler and Rose (1997) to capture feelings of distrust and trust for government and institutions ("There are many different institutions in this country, for example, the government, courts, police, civil servants. Please indicate on the 7-point scale below, where 1 represents great distrust and 7 represents great trust, how much is your personal trust in each of the following:").

Support for Democratic Governance and Values. Support for democratic governance was measured with two indexes used on the World Values Survey (WVS; www.worldvaluessurvey.org) as measures of the stability of democracy (Inglehart, 2003): the Democracy/Autocracy Index and the Materialist/Post-materialist Values Index. The Democracy/Autocracy Index consists of four statements rated on a 5-point scale (strongly disagree to strong agree) combined as $(C+D) - (A+B)$ and rescaled to 0-1 for ease of interpretation. A higher score indicates greater support for democratic governance:

- A. Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country is a good way of governing this country.
- B. Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with Congress and elections is a good way of governing this country.
- C. Having a democratic political system is a good way of governing this country.
- D. Democracy may have its problems, but it's better than any other form of government.

The Materialist/Post-materialist Values Index prompts participants to choose two of four items (“People differ in assigning priority or importance to various goals. If you had to choose among the following things, which are the two that seem most desirable to you?”):

1. Maintain order in the nation
2. Give people more say in the decisions of the government
3. Fight rising prices
4. Protect free speech

Answers were coded as 1 = items 1 and 3; 2= items 1 and 2 *or* items 1 and 4 *or* items 2 and 3 *or* items 3 and 4; and 3 = items 2 and 4. A higher score on the index indicates greater support for democratic governance.

To measure support for democratic values, people indicated on 5-point scales how strongly they agreed or disagreed with two statements used on the WVS, “It is important to have civil rights that protect people’s liberty from state oppression” and “It’s okay for the government to stop people from saying things that are offensive to some groups.”

Satisfaction with the Democratic System. To measure satisfaction with the democratic system participants answered three questions from the WVS, “On the whole, are you extremely satisfied, very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in the United States?”; “Would you say that the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all people?”; and “How much do you feel that having elections makes the government pay attention to what people think?”, answered with not so much, some, and a good deal. Each question was treated as a separate variable.

Emotions. Following previous studies (e.g. Lecheler, Bos, & Vliegenthart, 2015; Levin, Kteily, Pratto, Sidnaius, & Matthews, 2016), participants were asked to rate how much they felt ten specific emotions in response to the blame message. Studies of emotions often look at the impact of valence rather than individual emotions, but discrete emotions with the same valence can produce different behavioral and attitudinal effects (i.e. anger and fear; Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Peterson, 2010). As such, this research explores the impact of valence as well as distinct emotions. The emotions chosen were previously studied in the political and policy literature or identified as discrete emotions in the psychological literature likely to elicit unique behavioral

and attitudinal responses. Participants rated on 5-point scales (not at all to very) the extent to which the blame message induced feelings of anger, disgust, fear, sadness, nervousness, shame, hope, happiness, excitement, and pride (“This scale consists of a number of words that describe different feelings and emotions. Please read each item and indicate to what extent Representative Young’s tweets make you feel this way right now”; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Positive and negative emotions were averaged to create two variables, positive affect (hope, happiness, excitement, pride; $\alpha=0.90$, $M=2.19$, $SD=1.13$) and negative affect (anger, disgust, fear, sadness, nervousness, shame; $\alpha=0.88$, $M=2.34$, $SD=0.98$).

Control Variables. To control for any response bias associated with knowledge of the student loan debt crisis or personal experience with student loans, participants were asked: “How familiar or unfamiliar are you with the ongoing student loan debt crisis?”; “How much attention do you think the student loan debt crisis is receiving from lawmakers? Would you say it is receiving the right amount of attention, it should receive more attention, it should receive less attention, or are you unsure?”; and “Do you have now or did you have in the past student loan debt?”

All models also included a general measure of political knowledge as a control variable since people who more closely follow politics are more likely to be familiar with what is a credible message associated with each party. Following Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), participants were asked “Which party held the majority in the U. S. House of Representatives before the 2016 election?”; “Which job or political office is currently held by Mike Pence?”; and “Which party would you say is more conservative?” Answers were added together to create a 4-point index ranging from none correct to all correct.

A dichotomous variable indicating whether the participant identified with the message sender's party was created to control for variations due to partisan leanings. Party identification was determined through a two-part question similar to that used on the General Social Survey (GSS). Participants who answered independent or neither to "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?" were asked "Do you generally lean toward the Republican or Democratic Party?" Leaners were included in the in-group category along with party identifiers because for many variables related to partisanship, leaners indicate stronger preferences than weak partisans (Petrocik, 1974). Opposition identifiers and true independents were included in the outgroup category.

Results

It is expected that variations in the blame message will lead to variations in emotional arousal such that blame messages will elicit greater negative emotions and no blame messages will elicit greater positive emotions (H1). Differences in emotional arousal are expected between those who received a blame message targeting an opposing party, a non-political group, and a no blame message. It is also expected that differences in emotional arousal will lead to variations in democratic support, such that positive emotions will lead to more support and negative emotions will lead to less support (H2). No difference is hypothesized for the direct effect of variations in blame on democratic support because it is expected that emotions will indirectly mediate the relationship between the blame message and dimensions of democratic support (H3). Three dichotomous variables for each comparison were created to test these differences: targeting an opposing party to targeting universities, targeting an opposing party to no target of blame, and targeting universities to no target of blame.

Direct Effects of Variations in Blame on Dimensions of Democratic Support

Indirect mediation does not require that the independent variable directly impact the dependent variable (Zhao, Lynch, & Chen, 2010); therefore, no direct effects between the independent and dependent variables are predicted. As expected, no direct effects were detected for most treatment comparisons and dimensions of democratic support. However, in a few cases direct effects were found. Compared to the blame universities conditions, those in the blame opposing party conditions scored higher on the Democracy/Autocracy Index ($b=0.029, p<0.05$) and the Post-Materialist Values Index ($b=0.316, p<0.05$), indicating higher support for democracy, but compared to those in the no blame conditions, reported being less satisfied with democracy ($b=-0.188, p<0.05$). Compared to those in the no blame conditions, those in the blame universities conditions were also less satisfied with democracy ($b= -0.174, p<0.05$) and less likely to believe that elections make politicians pay attention to what people think ($b=-0.304, p<0.05$). It appears that blame messages may cause people to believe democracy isn't working as it should, but nonetheless, may reinforce support for democracy and its goals. In these cases, any mediation effects will be direct rather than indirect.

Direct Effects of Variations in Blame on Emotional Arousal

Comparing mean emotions by treatment conditions (Table 5.3) reveals that participants in the blame opposing party conditions exhibited the most negative emotions, followed by the blame universities, then no blame conditions. Conversely, those in the no blame conditions exhibited the highest levels of positive emotions, followed by the blame universities, then blame opposing party conditions.

Table 5.4 displays all regression coefficients for emotions on treatment comparisons. Significant differences were found for negative affect, disgust, positive affect, and hope

comparing the blame opposing party to blame universities conditions. Comparing the blame opposing party to no blame conditions, significant differences were detected for all emotions except nervousness. Between the blame universities and no blame conditions, significant differences were found for all but four emotions, nervous, shame, sad, and fear. Overall the results support the prediction that the blame conditions would arouse greater levels of negative emotions than the no blame conditions and the no blame conditions would arouse greater levels of positive emotions than the blame conditions (H1). However, variations in blame appeared to make more of a difference to participants feeling greater positive than negative emotions.

The Impact of Emotions on Dimensions of Democratic Support

Examining the impact of emotions on dimensions of democratic support without controlling for treatment condition revealed that regardless of valence, stronger emotional arousal led to the same variations in democratic support. That is, when results were significant, stronger positive and negative emotions impacted the different dimensions of democratic support in the same direction. Anger and sadness were not found to have any effect on any dimension of democratic support and across dimensions, positive emotions more consistently impacted democratic support than negative emotions. Table 5.5 displays the regression coefficients for each dimension of democratic support by each emotion. These results provide only partial support for hypothesis two. When significant, negative emotions decreased democratic support as measured with the Democracy/Autocracy and Post-Materialist Values Indices, willingness to protect free speech, and the importance of civil rights. Contrary to expectations, however, participants exhibiting stronger negative emotions indicated increased support for all four trust measures, satisfaction with democracy, elections cause politicians to pay attention to what the public thinks, and government is run for the people. Conversely, positive emotions increased

support for all four trust measures, satisfaction with democracy, elections cause politicians to pay attention to what the public thinks, and government is run for the people. But, also contrary to expectations, participants with stronger positive emotions indicated decreased support on the Democracy/Autocracy and Post-Materialist Values Indices, free speech, and the importance of civil rights.

Mediation Analysis

Table 5.6 displays the results of mediation analysis. With the exception of the Post-Materialist Values Index where no mediation effect occurred, significant mediation was detected for at least one emotion variable across all dimensions of democratic support. Looking first at dimensions with direct effects, controlling for the mediators and comparing the blame opposing party to blame universities conditions, the direct effect of variations in blame was rendered nonsignificant by hope for the Democracy/Autocracy Index ($b=0.020, p>0.05$). Comparing the blame opposing party to no blame conditions, the direct effect of variations in blame was rendered nonsignificant by all positive emotions for the measure satisfaction with democracy (positive affect: $b=-0.079, p>0.05$; excite: $b=-0.105, p>0.05$; happy: $b=-0.111, p>0.05$; hope: $b=-0.065, p>0.05$; pride: $b=-0.138, p>0.05$). Additionally, for satisfaction with democracy, all positive emotions also fully mediated the effect of variations in blame when comparing the blame universities to no blame conditions (positive affect: $b=-0.106, p>0.05$; excite: $b=-0.122, p>0.05$; happy: $b=-0.125, p>0.05$; hope: $b=-0.119, p>0.05$; pride: $b=-0.132, p>0.05$). Negative affect and disgust were found to act as suppressor variables for satisfaction with democracy when comparing the blame opposing party to no blame conditions (negative emotions: $b=-0.221, p<0.01$; disgust: $b=-0.226, p<0.001$). In these instances, negative affect and disgust magnified the effect of variations in blame on satisfaction with democracy.

Table 5.6 also illustrates that even when direct effects were absent, the differing emotions aroused by variations in blame often impacted levels of democratic support. Hope proved to be the most impactful emotional response as it was effected by all comparisons and functioned as a mediator most often. It was the only emotion that proved to be a significant mediator for any dimension of democratic support when comparing the blame opposing party to blame universities conditions. For this comparison, along with full direct mediation for the Democracy/Autocracy Index, hope indirectly mediated for all four trust measures (government in Washington, Republican Party, Democratic Party, and Congress), limit free speech, civil rights are important, and satisfaction with democracy.

The literature repeatedly indicates that enthusiasm, anger and anxiety are very important in understanding political behavior (e.g. Redlawsk, Civettini, & Lau, 2007; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993; Brader, Marcus, & Miller, 2011; Ryan, 2012; Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz, & Hutchings, 2011). Excitement did prove to be a significant mediator for many dimensions of democratic support when comparing the blame to no blame conditions. Surprisingly, however, anger had no impact on any dimension of democratic support. Nervousness and fear both had direct effects on some measures of democratic support, but only fear proved to be an indirect mediator (for protection of civil rights and limiting free speech). The negative emotions that did indirectly mediate the variation in blame message increased trust in the Republican Party (disgust), the Democratic Party (shame and negative affect), and Congress (negative affect), which is surprising given that the literature points to a negative impact for conflict rhetoric on trust and confidence in government. Shame was also a significant indirect mediator for limit free speech, importance of civil rights, and the Democracy/Autocracy Index when comparing the blame opposing party to no blame conditions.

When comparing the blame conditions to no blame conditions, significant indirect effects were evident for positive and negative emotions across many dimensions of democratic support, but overall, mediation was more consistent for positive than negative emotions. This is not surprising, as the no blame conditions more consistently elicited greater positive emotions than the blame conditions did greater negative emotions. Specifically, when comparing the blame opposing party to no blame conditions all four positive emotions (excite, happy, hope, pride) and positive affect indirectly mediated the effect of variation in blame for all trust measures, the Democracy/Autocracy Index, and limit free speech. Excite, happy and pride proved to be indirect mediators for the importance of civil rights, while hope was the only indirect mediator for elections cause politicians to pay attention to what people think. When comparing the blame universities to no blame conditions, all four positive emotions indirectly mediated the effect of variation in blame for limit free speech and all trust measures, with the exception of pride and trust in Congress.

Overall, this mediation analysis confirms that emotions will indirectly mediate the impact of variations in blame, as predicted by hypothesis three. Despite an absence of direct effects, the emotions induced by the treatment significantly impacted many dimensions of democratic support, even when controlling for variations in blame. Additionally, in the presence of direct effects, full mediation occurred for some emotions and dimensions of democratic support. The directional effect of emotional impact, however, was not always as expected. For each dimension, democratic support was influenced in the same direction regardless of valence or the distinct emotion elicited by the blame message.

Discussion

Increasing amounts of research illustrate that emotions play an important role in political support and behavior. However, the extant literature provides very little guidance as to how the emotions elicited through political messaging likely impact more nebulous aspects of political support, such as satisfaction with the democratic system or support for democratic governance. By examining the impact of conflict rhetoric on macro-level political support through the mediating effects of emotional arousal, this research attempted to fill this gap in the literature. This study also contributes to the extensive literature on the role of negativity in politics by examining the differential impact of attacks against a political party to a non-political entity. The results of this research further support the growing evidence that demonstrates how variations in political messaging can lead to varying emotional responses and that emotions impact opinions and behaviors (e.g. Brader, 2005; Clifford & Wendell, 2016; Gardarian & van der Vort, 2014; Lecheler, Bos, & Vliegenthart, 2015; Smith, 2014). Not surprisingly, the variation in blame message produced very few direct effects on dimensions of democratic support. Much political messaging is crafted to garner short-term political support like vote choice and policy preferences, rather than regime support, and these results illustrate how the impact of political rhetoric on support for a system of governance is more complex than a simple immediate reaction.

For all emotions, the most frequent significant variations were found between the blame opposing party and no blame conditions. As expected, the blame conditions elicited more intense negative emotions than the no blame conditions, while the no blame conditions elicited more intense positive emotions than the blame conditions. But, participants reacted more negatively to the blame opposing party conditions than the blame universities condition, which

may be an indication of the known distaste for partisan rhetoric (Geer, 2006; Bartels, 2000; Brooks, 2000). While participants did also react more negatively to the blame universities conditions compared to the no blame conditions, it is possible that such attacks are not viewed in the same light as partisan attacks. Also, as expected, greater emotional arousal led to variations in democratic support for many of the dimensions and emotions measured. However, neither the valence of the emotions nor the difference in discrete emotions evoked seemed to matter in terms of the direction of the effect. For each measure of democratic support, the discrete emotions aroused by the political message influenced support for that measure in the same direction. These results are surprising given the growing number of articles that demonstrate how different discrete emotions often produce distinct behaviors and opinions (e.g. Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Peterson, Sznycer, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2012, Brader, Marcus & Miller, 2011). Yet here, it appears that only the intensity of emotional arousal impacted levels of democratic support. A possible reason for this is that the emotions elicited strengthened already existing opinions about democracy, rather than directionally influenced those opinions.

Important to note, however, is that the variations in blame were more effective at producing differences in the intensity of positive than negative emotions. That is, the no blame conditions appeared to more consistently elicit significantly more positive emotions than the blame conditions comparatively did with negative emotions. Overall, the pattern of emotional response and mediation effects indicate that increasing positive emotions may have more impact on levels of democratic support than negative emotions. Positive emotions were more likely to mediate the impact of variations in blame than negative emotions and the mediation effect was most consistent when comparing the blame opposing party to no blame conditions, but also frequent when comparing the blame universities to no blame conditions. It may be that when

considering support for democracy and its institutions and ideals, the positive emotions political messaging elicits are more important than the negative emotions. However, with the possible exception of hope, no conclusions can be drawn about the importance of some emotions over others as all emotions impacted democratic support in the same direction. Hope did prove to be the most prominent emotion in this study, as it was impacted by all treatment comparisons and effected all dimensions of democratic support. A search of the political science literature indicates that hope is an emotion not generally considered in political behavior, but as it is a future-oriented emotion (Aspinwall & Leaf, 2002) it is likely important to the consideration of political support over time. These results suggest that examining the role of hope in raising and maintaining political support is warranted.

The most interesting aspect of these results is the split among dependent measures where support grew and diminished. Eliciting intense emotional arousal led to greater democratic support as indicated by the trust and satisfaction with democratic governance measures, indicators of a healthy democracy, whereas the same emotions often led to significant decreases in support for democratic governance and values. These decreases indicated bear out some of the fears recently expressed regarding the decline in civility and other political norms negatively impacting support for democracy. However, the increases in the trust and satisfaction with democratic governance measures lends support to Aldrich's (2013) conclusions that the increasing incivility may actually be helping democratic health in the United States. This split in the direction of support among the measures may indicate a disconnect between how people feel about the government as it is working and how they feel about the mechanisms that actually constitute a legitimate democracy. Trusting the institutions that make up the system and

expressing satisfaction with how it is working is not the same thing as supporting a system of government and its inherent values as the best form of governance.

It is important to keep in mind that the variations in blame more consistently elicited strong positive than negative emotions and that the positive emotions more consistently impacted democratic support. This indicates that refraining from blame may be beneficial to indicators of a healthy democracy, such as trust in institutions and the belief that democracy is working. However, that these same emotions appear to suppress support for democratic governance and values is concerning. It may be that the no blame messages were pleasing to some precisely because they lacked offensive opinions and these messages reaffirmed and enhanced autocratic tendencies such as the willingness to limit free speech.

In the end, what can be concluded from these results is that variations in political messaging produce variations in emotional response and these emotions do impact democratic support. The results of this research do not allow for any definitive conclusions specifically about the negative repercussions of conflict rhetoric on support for democracy, as the no blame message appeared to have similar, although more consistent, impact.

Limitations

The largest limitation to drawing inferences from the results found here is that this experiment provides only a snapshot of a single moment in time. Any impact from negative political attacks on democratic support is likely to build over time. Some recent research indicates that the effects of sustained negative rhetoric can increase support for populism at the expense of democracy (Rico, Guinjoan, & Anduiza, 2017) and studies of democratic deconsolidation indicate that the erosion of norms can lead to a slow decline in support over time (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). One experiment using one message exposure and one set of

measures of democratic support cannot capture the cumulative effects of repeated exposure to political messaging, nor can any conclusions about lasting effects be drawn.

Although, temporally the experimental manipulations can be said to have caused variation in emotions elicited, it does not explain what specifically in the blame (or no blame) messages led to the variations in emotions. It is possible that the emotions elicited were in response to some perceptions not measured, such as who the participants felt was to blame for the student loan debt crisis. Perceptions of intentionality can influence emotional response (Peterson, 2010) and it is possible that variations in perception of the intentions of the blame target influenced responses. Additionally, it may be that respondents perceived another group not mentioned in the vignettes (i.e. students) as to blame for the student loan debt crisis.

The pattern of results indicates that the (lack of) attack influenced levels of positive and negative emotions felt by participants. It is very possible, however, that using another policy issue would have elicited a more distinct pattern of emotional responses. Further, a more salient or emotionally charged issue may result in more consistent direct effects or different appraisals of the democratic system, just as momentary issue salience influences perceptions of presidential performance (Edwards, Mitchell, & Welch, 1995). Further studies using a variety of policy issues and contexts are needed to determine the cognitive mechanisms leading to the variations in response.

Conclusion

This research sought to answer whether the open hostility between the political parties and other groups that is now the norm in American politics is contributing to the documented decline in support for democratic governance and values. It provides a contribution to the literature in that it focuses on the impact a routine attack message can have on democratic

support through the mediating impact of emotional arousal. In the end, this study adds additional support to the growing evidence that emotions matter in the role of political messaging in influencing political behavior. This experiment confirmed that variations in political messaging can lead to variations in emotional response, which in turn will impact democratic support. Yet, the experimental results were also unexpected in that it was the intensity of the emotions aroused rather than the valence or the variation in discrete emotions elicited that affected levels of democratic support.

The lack of variation among the impact of discrete emotions or the valence of the emotions aroused is contradictory to the conclusions of the growing literature examining the role of emotions in politics and the extensive literature on the psychology of emotions. Study after study confirms that different emotions lead to different cognitive, affective and behavioral responses (e.g. Johnston, Lavine, & Woodson, 2015; Keltner, Ellsworth & Edwards, 1993; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993; O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009; Smith, 2014; Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007). Typical studies looking at the role of emotions in politics often examine the types of political support more subject to short-term forces, such as vote choice or mobilization, but democratic support is likely related to perceptions of what democracy means. Satisfaction with and support for democracy, as well as trust in institutions and support for democratic values are more likely due to a longer arc of experiences, perceptions, and beliefs. Dalton, Sin, & Jou (2007) showed that perceptions of what democracy means are similar in democratic and non-democratic countries and developed and undeveloped countries. However, the emphasis in understanding shifts as exposure to democracy increases, such that people living in more established democracies put more emphasis on freedom and liberty, while those in younger democracies put more emphasis on democratic institutions and procedures. In this light, the

split found here for the impact of emotional arousal on dimensions of democratic support may not bode well for the future of popular democratic support in the United States in this era of relentless political messaging and news coverage.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT RHETORIC ON POLITICAL SUPPORT

Summary

The research reported in this dissertation has focused on the impact of conflict rhetoric on political support. Conflict rhetoric is defined as political rhetoric employed with the intent of highlighting differences between, and creating opposition to, people, groups or ideas. A major assumption in this work is that conflict rhetoric is used purposively by political actors to appeal to various social identities in the electorate with the aim of building political support. The purpose of this rhetorical strategy is to activate group identities through the identification of a threatening out-group. By identifying a threat to in-group status, political actors can sow anger and anxiety toward out-groups and reap in-group support.

Political support is a multi-dimensional concept that includes not only tangible actions (i.e. donating money to or voting for a specific candidate), but also latent attitudes such as partisan attachment, trust, and satisfaction with the system. Following Dalton's (1999) typology, each study contained herein examines the impact of conflict rhetoric on a different dimension of political support, and taken together, these studies provide an integrated view of the role conflict rhetoric plays in building and diminishing this support in the public.

Recent research suggests that partisan identity is an increasingly important filter through which people view the political parties, individual candidates, policy issues, and each other (Mason, 2018; 2015; 2013). Political messaging is very often focused on delineating the differences between the parties (Lee, 2016) and much of the research studying the various forms of conflict rhetoric (i.e. attack advertising) focuses on the partisan tensions inherent in these messages. Research indicates that conflict rhetoric increases partisan intensity in the electorate (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012), yet, it also suggests that people do not like the partisan attacks

so common in political rhetoric (Geer, 2006; Bartels, 2000; Brooks, 2000). The results reported here support this conclusion.

Political messaging, however, also frequently involves targeting different social groups or non-political entities as responsible for social problems rather than political parties and opponents (Hood, 2010). This strategy was repeatedly employed during the 2016 presidential campaign with, for example, Republican candidate Donald Trump blaming Mexicans and Muslims and Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT) targeting big banks for much of the economic and societal woes in the U.S. (Deggins, 2015; Healy & Barbaro 2016; McAuliff, 2015).

Surprisingly, limited literature can shed light on how the public feels about or responds to attacks on non-political groups. This research sought to fill this gap by answering whether there are differential impacts to varying targets of blame along different dimensions of political support.

Each article presented here relies upon social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978, Tajfel & Turner, 1986) to explain the importance of conflict rhetoric in building political support. Social identity theory posits it is human nature to self-categorize, but the positive value put on the group identity happens through comparison to other groups. Social group identity does not require formal membership because it is based on perceived rather than formal belonging (Greene, 1999) and is easily activated by group conflict (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The struggle over “who gets what, when, and how” (Lasswell, 1936) is the perfect backdrop for “us versus them” competition and the emotions attached to group success and failure. As suggested by social identity theory, politicians can use conflict rhetoric to maximize the perceived differences between their in-group and the out-group, thus stimulating favoritism with the in-group through the perceived threat by the out-group.

Partisan-based conflict rhetoric has grown more important in political strategy over time (Lee, 2016), but much of the rhetoric we hear from politicians appeals to group identities other than those based upon partisanship. As Mason (2018) points out, however, many divisions among social groups appear to sort neatly along partisan lines and this sorting reinforces an “us versus them” mentality and blind group allegiance. The brilliance of a blame strategy is that the group membership of the audience at which the blame appeal is directed doesn’t need to be explicitly defined. Because group identities are easily constructed and manipulated through rhetoric (Beasley, 2001), the use of subtle priming or cues in political messaging is sufficient to activate group identities (Seger, Smith, & Mackie, 2009). As such, appealing to a conscious sense of belonging is not necessary to activate negative emotions against an out-group (Mackie & Smith, 2017). Thus, conflict rhetoric designed to activate group allegiance among message receivers by creating an outgroup to rally against should serve to further partisan political goals, both electoral and legislative.

Blame as a rhetorical strategy is not new in politics, but it is not often examined in the literature. Most research focusing on blame has looked at how successful a “blame avoidance” strategy is for political actors and entities (e.g. Hood, 2010; Weaver 1998; James, Jilke, Peterson, & Van de Walle, 2016) and the role of personal responsibility and intentionality in support for public policy initiatives (e.g. Thibodeau, Perko, & Flusberg, 2014; Barry, Brescoll, Brownell, & Schlesinger, 2009; Peterson, Sznycer, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2012). The studies contained herein are meant to provide a broad understanding of the impact variations in blame as a rhetorical strategy has on the political system. Ultimately, the purpose of this research was to create a foundation for a broader research agenda that seeks to determine how the prevalence of conflict rhetoric in political discourse purposefully and inadvertently directs political outcomes. The first

two articles presented examined the impact of conflict rhetoric, as manifested in blaming, on distinct dimensions of political support that would impact partisan electoral and legislative goals. The third article took a broader perspective by examining what the long-term implications of the increasing incivility in political discourse may be for democracy.

Specifically, article one sought to answer whether, as suggested by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), politicians benefit from messages that create and sustain a sense of conflict between the parties by investigating the role conflict rhetoric plays in stimulating feelings of partisan intensity and altering assessments of the aligned and opposing parties. This study examined whether variations in the target of blame impact levels of political support as exhibited through partisan identity strength and perception of party reputation. Next, article two presented a framework within which to understand the influence of the media on political rhetoric and the ramifications for public policy. As suggested by mediatization theory (Esser & Stromback, 2014), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and social construction theory (Schneider & Ingram, 1997), the media's most important impact on the political system is indirect through its effect on elite rhetoric. The increased reliance on conflict rhetoric fostered by the mediatization of politics increases the likelihood that political actors will target groups to blame for social ills. As blaming creates or reinforces negative perceptions of outgroups, it can create demand for policy action against the offending group and these targeted groups are more likely to be subjected to coercive, controlling, or punitive policy (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). But, the success of such messages in raising political and policy support is likely dependent upon perceptions of message credibility. This research tested the impact of variations in blame on message and policy support through the mediating impact of message credibility.

Last, article three explored the relationship between conflict rhetoric, emotions and democratic support. The power of rhetoric as a persuasive tool lay in its ability to “engage and transform emotions” in the audience (Kastely, 2004, p. 222; Giorgias, 1972) and intense emotional arousal is linked to the activation of many dimensions of political behavior (see Demertizis, 2013). This study focused on a dimension of political support mostly overlooked by the conflict rhetoric and emotion research: democratic support. As *New York Times* columnist Thomas Edsall (2017) has argued, conventional norms keeping political discourse within the bounds of truth and good taste seem to have been abandoned and may be a contributor to the recent documented decline in democratic support (see Foa & Mounk, 2017). This article examined whether conflict rhetoric is, in fact, contributing to the detected decline in support for democratic governance and values through the arousal of negative emotions.

By examining the differential effects of variations in blame, these articles offer a broad overview of whether and when politicians may benefit from attacking the opposing party, attacking a non-political group, or refraining from an attack. In the end, the results indicate that blaming an opposing party offers more harm than good, blaming a non-political group can be effective at manipulating perceptions of the attacked group and raising demand for punitive policies, and no blame messages elicit positive reactions that are beneficial to political parties, but arouse emotions that both help and harm measures of democratic support.

Overall, blaming an opposing party had impacts that should be undesirable to political parties and lends support to earlier research that suggests that people do not like partisan politics (e.g. Ramirez, 2009; Harbridge & Malhotra, 2011; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995). It weakened support on measures of partisan identity and party reputation, especially for the Democratic Party; participants perceived these messages as the least credible and were less likely to agree

with the content of the message; and they diminished satisfaction with democracy and the perception that elections cause politicians to pay attention to what people think. These results cannot shed light on whether these impacts definitively hurt politicians and political parties electorally, but as markers of short-term political support, they do not seem to help.

The impact on markers of long-term support were mixed. Attacking the opposing party did elicit the most negative emotions among participants, which may be the intention of such attacks, but this had mixed effects on measures of democratic support. The negative emotions evoked by this attack raised markers of satisfaction with how the government is working, but diminished support for democracy and its values. There are some indicators (as with message credibility), however, that the negative effects were less prevalent among partisans, which suggests that partisan attacks may not cause significant harm among base supporters. But, these types of attacks will not likely increase the base, as it does push others away. This may help to explain the contradiction between the results found here and what seems to be a rise in virulent partisanship in the electorate (Mason, 2015). It may also explain the increase in the number of people that claim no party affiliation (Stonecash, 2006), as partisan attacks may be more likely to alienate weak partisans and independents.

More short-term benefits seem to derive from blaming a non-political group. If politicians do use these types of attacks to manipulate perceptions of the targeted group and raise support for policies targeting those groups, then the results reported in article two support that this is a viable strategy. People in the blame universities conditions did perceive universities significantly more negatively and, compared to those in the no blame conditions, were more likely to believe the student loan debt crisis to be an important issue. Additionally, the more negatively participants perceived universities the more likely they were to support punitive

policy targeting universities. Universities are likely not readily identified as an outgroup the same way that a definable social group is. As such, these results suggest that blame is effective, not because of explicit appeals to group identity, but because it creates an outgroup to rally against. This strategy of generating negative affect toward an outgroup to build political support is hardly new. It was, after all, the basis of the Republican Party's southern strategy to curry favor with white southerners through appeals to racial tensions (McVeigh, Cunningham, & Farrell, 2014). The results here indicate that this strategy can be deployed specifically to build public support for policies that deny benefits or harm certain groups, which is cause for concern for its long-term impact on basic democratic values like equality and freedom.

Important to note is that the blame universities conditions elicited more negative reactions and lower perceptions of credibility than did the no blame conditions, indicating that these messages may also harm some components of political support. That negativity is a risky strategy because it can cause a backlash against the message sender is well established (Damore, 2002; Dowling & Wichovsky, 2015; Hale, Fox & Farmer, 1996; Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Peterson & Djupe, 2005; Theilmann & Wilhite, 1998; Banda & Windett, 2016; Fridkin & Kenney, 2004), but the results here also lend support to research indicating the backlash can extend to feelings for the group (Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007). Overall, however, these results suggest that blaming a non-political group is a strategy that can be effectively deployed to build political support around policy issues and initiatives.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the lack of blame provoked more positive reactions in participants. The no blame messages led to the highest levels of partisan identity, were found to be the most credible and, compared to the blame opposing party conditions, participants were more likely to agree with the message. Among Democrats these messages led to greater affect

and perception of party competence for the Democratic Party, while, interestingly, a lack of blame led Republicans to perceive their party as less competent compared to the other conditions. This indicates that the ramifications of political messaging are not uniform for the political parties and perhaps people have different behavioral expectations for each party. Compared to the blame universities conditions, these messages led to greater satisfaction with democracy and the belief that elections cause politicians to pay attention to what people think.

The no blame messages also more consistently elicited positive emotions from participants than the blame messages did negative emotions. The positive emotions elicited by these messages led to increases in markers that people are satisfied with how democracy and institutions are working, but they also led to decreases in markers of support for democratic governance and values. The negative emotions aroused had similar effects. That neither the difference in valence nor the distinct emotions elicited led to differential impact is unexpected and not easily explained given that the literature strongly supports variations in attitudinal and behavioral responses due to the arousal of different emotions. This may possibly be explained by the fact that conflict rhetoric generally is not aimed at building or diminishing democratic support, but rather is aimed at markers of short-term support such as vote choice or candidate perceptions. The distinct emotions elicited by political rhetoric may very well cause differential outcomes for short-term support, but for democratic support these same emotions may simply intensify already held beliefs and perceptions rather than cause shifts in direction. Most important to keep in mind, however, is that variations in blame produced significantly different emotional intensity among participants and this in turn impacted levels of democratic support, indicating how easily and surreptitiously political rhetoric can influence citizens' perceptions of government and governance.

Limitations and Future Research

The conclusions that can be drawn from these studies are limited in part because of the experimental design. The results of these experiments only provide a snapshot in time and can't speak to the cumulative effect of years of exposure to conflict rhetoric. People are regularly exposed to multiple political messages of varying strength, source, direction, and topics. Studies have repeatedly shown that competing (e.g. Zaller, 1992; Chong & Druckman, 2010; Arceneux, 2012) and repeated messages (e.g. Zajonc, 2001; Monahan, Murphy, & Zajonc, 2000; Harrison, 1977; Crisp, Hutter, & Young, 2009; Brickman, Redfield, Harrison, & Crandall, 1972) can impact reactions and perceptions. One message exposure at one moment in time is not enough to definitively draw any conclusions about behavioral or attitudinal responses or lasting effects. Additionally, without pre-test measurements the direction of the effect among individual participants remains an unknown. The results certainly point to long-term consequences that are critical to the health of democracy. As such, more studies specifically designed to assess the impact of conflict rhetoric over time are needed. This is not a simple task and requires a combination of experimental, survey, and secondary data.

The use of one policy issue also limits what can be learned from these studies. As an issue, the student loan debt crisis is likely less salient than some more hot button issues (i.e. abortion or immigration) and that variations in blame for this issue still produced significant results is telling. Generally, speaking the results show that conflict rhetoric is a powerful political tool that can have unintended and possibly far-reaching effects. But, using only one issue limits the generalizability of these findings and further studies varying or combining policy issues would help determine if these results are anomalies and whether people were reacting to the negative tone of the message or to the policy issue. Necessity often compels researchers to

narrow the range of individual projects, however, the variation in impact across short- and long-term dimensions of political support suggests that future studies with a broader scope would aid in understanding the full impact of conflict rhetoric on the political system.

Study Implications

Despite these limitations, some inferences about conflict rhetoric can be drawn. It is noteworthy that one message exposure could produce significant results along so many dimensions of political support and highlights how impactful political rhetoric is on the public. For the most part, attacking a political party does not seem to be a boon to short-term political prospects and these results confirm a distaste for partisan politics that is suggested in the literature. But the steady increase in such attacks by politicians (Franklin-Fowler, Ridout & Franz, 2016) coupled with the apparent increase in partisan intensity in the electorate (Mason, 2013, 2015; Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012) belie these results. Strong partisans are more likely to expect and be motivated by partisan attacks (Wolf, Strachan, & Shea, 2012) and the negative impact detected here may be due to shifts among weak rather than strong partisans. The results for article two, however, suggest that attacking a non-political group is beneficial for building policy support and indicate how easily these types of attacks work. Blaming a non-political group appears to be sound political strategy for short-term gain, as the results of the 2016 election anecdotally support. Politicians can use conflict rhetoric to effectively build political support around a policy issue, but this strategy is risky because it can also diminish party support.

Furthermore, the long-term implications for the status of these attacked groups in society suggests that the result will be detrimental to the furtherance of democratic values and principles. This conclusion is supported by the results from article three. While the direct effects of

variations in blame on democratic support were limited, the results suggest that political rhetoric aimed at short-term support can create an atmosphere of intense emotional arousal that affects people's perceptions of broader systems of governance. The effects appeared both positive and negative, but the split in impact along the dimensions of democratic support suggest that the emotions aroused by political rhetoric improves short-term perspectives of democratic governance but damages long-term assessments of the value of democracy and its ideals.

Taken together these results illustrate how political messaging requires nuanced strategy if it is to be effective and provides a broad overview of how a specific political strategy impacts different levels of the political system. Different types of negative messages have both positive and negative impacts on the variety of ways the public can exhibit political support and the results suggest that rhetoric used for short-term political gain can come at the expense of long-term democratic health. Studies of political efficacy and mobilization already point to these ramifications (e.g. Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; see Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007). The evolution in media has led to an atmosphere of relentless and combative political messaging and future research should examine how these short- and long-term markers of political support and democratic health shift and respond together.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: TABLES

Table 1.1: Appearances of the Words “Civility” and “Incivility”
in NYT Articles and Editorials

Year	New York Times Articles	New York Times Editorials
1940s	44	0
1950s	59	0
1960s	179	16
1970s	473	25
1980s	845	60
1990s	1581	137

Source: Gitlin (2013)

Table 2.1: Levels of Political Support

Level of Analysis	Affective Orientations	Instrumental Evaluations
Community	National pride National identity	Best nation to live
Regime: Principles	Democratic values	Democracy best form of government
Regime: Political Process	Participatory norms Political rights	Evaluation of rights Satisfaction with democratic process
Regime: Political Institutions	Institutional expectations Support parties Output expectations	Performance judgments Trust in institutions Trust party system
Authorities	Feelings toward political leaders Party Identification	Evaluations of politicians

Source: Dalton (1999).

Table 2.2: Conceptual Definitions for Conflict Rhetoric, Dimensions of Political Support, and Intervening Variables

Variables	Conceptual Definitions
<i>Conflict Rhetoric</i>	Political rhetoric employed with the intent of highlighting differences between, and creating opposition to, people, groups or ideas
Dimensions of Political Support	
<i>Partisan Identity</i>	The extent to which people feel group attachment to a political party
<i>Party Reputation</i>	The level of esteem people hold for a political party
<i>Message Support</i>	Attitude orientation toward the message content
<i>Policy Support</i>	The level of approval for policy initiatives
<i>Democratic Support</i>	People’s attitudes toward democracy and the political system
Intervening Variables	
<i>Credibility</i>	Believability
<i>Emotions</i>	Specific feeling states that arise from events that happen and prevailing situations

Table 3.1: Sample Characteristics, Experiment One

Sample Characteristics					
Age	18-39	Ideology			
	<i>M</i> =20.23		Conservative	47%	
	<i>SD</i> =2.64		Liberal	41%	
Race		Neither	12%		
	White				
	80%	Party Identification			
	African American		10%	Republican	38%
	Hispanic/Latino		3%	Democrat	29%
	Asian		3%	Leaner	25%
	Native American		<1%	Independent	7%
Pacific Islander	<1%				
Unknown/other	3%				
Gender		Student Loan Debt			
			Yes	68%	
	Male		44%	No	32%
	Female		55%		
No answer	<1%	N	392		

Table 3.2: Experimental Design

Message Sender	Target of Blame		
	<i>Blame Opposing Party</i>	<i>Blame Non-Political Group</i>	<i>No Blame</i>
<i>Republican Politician</i>	Blame Democratic Party	Blame Universities	No Target of Blame
<i>Democratic Politician</i>	Blame Republican Party	Blame Universities	No Target of Blame

Table 3.3: Dependent Variables, Article One

Partisan Identity				
	<i>Party Identity Strength</i>	<i>Group Identity Strength</i>		
<i>M</i>	2.49	2.66		
<i>SD</i>	0.98	0.84		
Range	0-4	1.5		
Party Reputation				
	<i>Affect for Republican Party</i>	<i>Affect for Democratic Party</i>	<i>Republican Party Competence</i>	<i>Democratic Party Competence</i>
<i>M</i>	4.71	4.88	1.81	2.12
<i>SD</i>	3.01	2.84	1.89	1.31
Range	0-10	0-10	0-4	0-4

N=364

Table 3.4: Sample Distribution of Party Identification Strength

Party Identity by Strength		Strength of Party Identification (Folded Scale with Leaners)	
Strong Democrat	9%	Neutral	1%
Moderate Democrat	25%	Weak	17%
Weak Democrat	9%	Leaner	27%
Neutral	2%	Moderate	41%
Weak Republican	14%	Strong	14%
Moderate Republican	31%		
Strong Republican	10%	N	364
N	265		

Table 3.5: Mean Partisan Identity Strength by Target of Blame Message

Partisan Identity Measure	Target of Negative Message		
	<i>Blame Opposing Party</i>	<i>Blame Universities</i>	<i>No Blame</i>
<i>Party Identity Strength</i>	2.35 (1.02)	2.55 (0.95)	2.57 (0.96)
<i>Group Identity Strength</i>	2.59 (0.86)	2.63 (0.85)	2.72 (0.82)
	N=115	N=122	N=127

Standard deviations in parentheses; Scale 0-4

Table 3.6: OLS Regression for Strength of Party Affiliation on Differing Targets of Blame

Variables	(1) Party Identification Strength	(2) Party Identification Strength
Blame Opposing Party	-0.269** (0.126)	-0.223* (0.126)
Blame Universities	-0.045 (0.123)	
No Blame		0.045 (0.123)
Ideology	0.001 (0.032)	-0.001 (0.032)
Student Loan Debt	-0.0214 (0.116)	-0.214 (0.116)
Familiarity with Student Loan Debt Reform	0.077* (0.044)	0.077* (0.044)
Importance of Student Loan Debt Reform	-0.198*** (0.074)	-0.198*** (0.074)
Concern with Student Loan Debt Reform	0.115 (0.070)	0.115 (0.070)
Constant	2.920*** (0.372)	2.850** (0.376)
N	364	364
R^2	0.039	0.039
F	2.07**	2.07**

Standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$, two-tailed tests

Table 3.7: OLS Regression for Strength of Group Identity on Differing Targets of Blame

Variables	(1)	(2)
	Group Identification Strength	Group Identification Strength
Blame Opposing Party	-0.180* (0.108)	-0.062 (0.107)
Blame Universities	-0.119 (0.105)	
No Blame		0.119 (0.105)
Ideology	0.077*** (0.028)	0.077*** (0.028)
Student Loan Debt	0.017 (0.099)	0.017 (0.099)
Familiarity with Student Loan Debt Reform	-0.034 (0.038)	-0.034 (0.038)
Importance of Student Loan Debt Reform	-0.128** (0.063)	-0.128** (0.063)
Concern with Student Loan Debt Reform	0.204*** (0.060)	0.204*** (0.060)
Constant	2.276*** (0.334)	2.157*** (0.370)
N	364	364
R ²	0.053	0.053
F	2.82***	2.82**

Standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$, two-tailed tests

Table 3.8: Mean Party Affect by Treatment Group and Participant Party Alignment

Treatment Group	Affect for Democratic Party		Affect for Republican Party	
	<i>Participant Party Alignment</i>		<i>Participant Party Alignment</i>	
	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans
Blame Opposing Party	6.36 (2.19)	3.07 (2.12)	2.95 (1.79)	7.52 (2.03)
Blame Universities	7.05 (1.99)	3.10 (2.24)	3.56 (1.97)	7.93 (2.18)
No Blame	7.55 (1.86)	3.05 (1.86)	3.21 (1.82)	7.80 (2.20)
N	165	199	165	199

Standard deviations in parentheses; Scale 0-10

Table 3.9: Mean Party Competence by Treatment Group and Participant Party Alignment

Treatment Group	Party Competence for Democratic Party		Party Competence for Republican Party	
	Participant Party Alignment		Participant Party Alignment	
	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans
Blame Opposing Party	2.85 (0.85)	1.31 (1.09)	1.14 (0.98)	2.55 (1.01)
Blame Universities	3.11 (0.86)	1.42 (1.11)	1.00 (0.82)	2.52 (1.02)
No Blame	3.12 (0.82)	1.34 (1.16)	0.93 (0.78)	2.32 (0.98)
N	165	199	165	199

Standard deviations in parentheses; Scale 0-4

Table 3.10: OLS Regression for Affect for Democratic Party on Differing Targets of Blame by Participant Party Affiliation

Variables	Affect for Democratic Party			
	(1) <i>Democrats</i>	(2) <i>Democrats</i>	(3) <i>Republicans</i>	(4) <i>Republicans</i>
Blame Opposing Party	-1.290*** (0.344)	-0.869** (0.357)	0.079 (0.350)	-0.058 (0.339)
Blame Universities	-0.421 (0.319)		0.137 (0.348)	
No Blame		0.421 (0.319)		-0.137 (0.348)
Ideology	-0.640*** (0.138)	-0.640*** (0.138)	-0.433*** (0.155)	-0.433*** (0.155)
Student Loan Debt	-0.143 (0.327)	-0.143 (0.327)	0.159 (0.308)	0.159 (0.308)
Familiarity with Student Loan Debt Reform	-0.570*** (0.119)	-0.570*** (0.119)	-0.106 (0.125)	-0.106 (0.125)
Importance of Student Loan Debt Reform	0.167 (0.229)	0.167 (0.229)	0.678*** (0.192)	0.678*** (0.192)
Concern with Student Loan Debt Reform	0.105 (0.205)	0.105 (0.205)	-0.250 (0.185)	-0.250 (0.185)
Constant	9.694*** (1.197)	9.272*** (1.194)	4.017*** (1.225)	3.880*** (1.215)
N	165	165	199	199
R ²	0.249	0.249	0.141	0.141
F	7.42***	7.42***	4.49***	4.49***

Standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, two-tailed tests

Table 3.11: OLS Regression for Affect for Republican Party on Differing Targets of Blame by Participant Party Affiliation

Variables	Affect for Republican Party			
	(5) <i>Democrats</i>	(6) <i>Democrats</i>	(7) <i>Republicans</i>	(8) <i>Republicans</i>
Blame Opposing Party	-0.123 (0.321)	-0.408 (0.334)	-0.103 (0.333)	-0.139 (0.321)
Blame Universities	0.285 (0.299)		0.036 (0.331)	
No Blame		-0.285 (0.299)		-0.036 (0.331)
Ideology	0.846*** (0.129)	0.846*** (0.129)	1.089*** (0.147)	-0.147*** (0.155)
Student Loan Debt	0.202 (0.306)	0.202 (0.306)	0.826*** (0.293)	0.826*** (0.293)
Familiarity with Student Loan Debt Reform	0.162 (0.111)	0.162 (0.111)	-0.257** (0.118)	-0.257** (0.118)
Importance of Student Loan Debt Reform	0.024 (0.214)	0.024 (0.214)	-0.055 (0.183)	-0.055 (0.183)
Concern with Student Loan Debt Reform	-0.256 (0.192)	-0.256 (0.192)	0.221 (0.176)	0.221 (0.176)
Constant	0.354 (1.12)	0.639 (1.12)	-0.107 (1.156)	-0.071 (1.165)
N	165	165	199	199
R ²	0.270	0.249	0.265	0.265
F	8.28***	7.42***	9.84***	9.84***

Standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, two-tailed tests

Table 3.12: OLS Regression for Democratic Party Competence on Differing Targets of Blame by Participant Party Affiliation

Variables	Democratic Party Competence			
	(5) <i>Democrats</i>	(6) <i>Democrats</i>	(7) <i>Republicans</i>	(8) <i>Republicans</i>
Blame Opposing Party	-0.375** (0.155)	-0.360** (0.161)	-0.127 (0.192)	-0.214 (0.185)
Blame Universities	-0.015 (0.144)		0.087 (0.191)	
No Blame		0.015 (0.144)		-0.087 (0.191)
Ideology	-0.099*** (0.062)	-0.099*** (0.062)	-0.380*** (0.085)	-0.380*** (0.085)
Student Loan Debt	0.104 (0.146)	0.104 (0.146)	0.025 (0.169)	0.025 (0.169)
Familiarity with Student Loan Debt Reform	-0.057 (0.054)	-0.057 (0.054)	0.111 (0.068)	0.111 (0.068)
Importance of Student Loan Debt Reform	-0.159 (0.103)	-0.159 (0.103)	0.014 (0.105)	0.014 (0.105)
Concern with Student Loan Debt Reform	0.408*** (0.093)	0.408*** (0.093)	-0.343 (0.101)	-0.343 (0.101)
Constant	2.475*** (0.541)	2.460*** (0.538)	3.191*** (0.664)	3.28*** (0.670)
N	165	165	199	199
R ²	0.172	0.172	0.110	0.110
F	4.66***	4.66***	3.36***	3.36***

Standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, two-tailed tests

Table 3.13: OLS Regression for Republican Party Competence on Differing Targets of Blame by Participant Party Affiliation

Variables	Republican Party Competence			
	(5) <i>Democrats</i>	(6) <i>Democrats</i>	(7) <i>Republicans</i>	(8) <i>Republicans</i>
Blame Opposing Party	0.283* (0.159)	0.229 (0.166)	0.307* (0.167)	0.126 (0.161)
Blame Universities	0.054 (0.148)		0.181 (0.166)	
No Blame		-0.054 (0.148)		-0.181 (0.166)
Ideology	0.175*** (0.064)	0.175*** (0.064)	0.435*** (0.074)	0.435*** (0.074)
Student Loan Debt	-0.154 (0.152)	-0.154 (0.152)	0.160 (0.147)	0.160 (0.147)
Familiarity with Student Loan Debt Reform	-0.017 (0.055)	-0.017 (0.055)	-0.013 (0.059)	-0.013 (0.059)
Importance of Student Loan Debt Reform	0.024 (0.106)	0.024 (0.106)	0.092 (0.092)	0.092 (0.092)
Concern with Student Loan Debt Reform	-0.225** (0.095)	-0.225** (0.095)	-0.017 (0.088)	-0.017 (0.088)
Constant	2.475*** (0.541)	1.579*** (0.554)	-0.515 (0.579)	-0.333 (0.584)
N	165	165	199	199
R ²	0.131	0.131	0.167	0.167
F	3.39***	3.39***	5.45***	5.45***

Standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$, two-tailed tests

Table 4.1: Sample Characteristics, Experiment Two

Sample Characteristics					
Age	18-85	Ideology		Education	
	<i>M</i> =43.55 <i>SD</i> =16.86				
Race		Liberal 40%		High School Diploma 24%	
	White 64%	Party Identification		Some college 28%	
	African American 11%		Republican 34%	Associate's Degree 13%	
	Hispanic/Latino 14%		Democrat 46%	Bachelor's Degree 21%	
	Asian 7%	Independent 20%	Master's Degree 8%		
	Native American 1%	Income		Professional Degree/Ph. D. 3%	
	Pacific Islander <1%		<\$20,000 20%	Student Loan Debt	
Unknown/other 3%	\$20,000-\$39,999 25%		Yes 43%		
Gender			\$40,000-\$59,999 21%		No 57%
	Male 49%	\$60,000-\$79,999 14%			
	Female 51%	\$80,000-\$99,999 7%			
	No answer <1%	>\$100,000 13%			

N=1023

Table 4.2: Dependent Variables, Article Two

	Dimensions of Message Support					
	Perception of Outgroup					
	<i>Message Agreement</i>	<i>Issue Importance</i>	<i>Item 1: Educational Experience</i>	<i>Item 2: Bottom Line</i>	<i>Item 3: Positive Effect</i>	<i>Item 4: Make College Affordable</i>
Mean	3.56	3.59	3.00	3.83	3.10	3.80
SD	1.11	0.95	1.15	1.05	1.14	1.06
Range	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-5
	Dimensions of Policy Support					
		Policy Proposals				
		<i>Policy Demand</i>	<i>Policy 1: Gov't Puts Lien on Paychecks</i>	<i>Policy 2: Eliminate Interest on Loans</i>	<i>Policy 3: Universities Pay Back Loan Funds</i>	<i>Policy 4: Universities Decide Amount Students Borrow</i>
Mean	1.90	2.50	4.13	3.41	3.20	
SD	0.88	1.34	1.02	1.19	1.19	
Range	1-3	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-5	

N=1023

Table 4.3: Mean Perception of Outgroup by Treatment Condition

Statements About Universities	Conditions		
	<i>Blame Opposing Parties</i>	<i>Blame Universities</i>	<i>No Blame</i>
1. Colleges today are mostly interested in making sure students have a good educational experience*	<i>M=2.99</i> <i>SD=1.14</i>	<i>M=2.91</i> <i>SD=1.14</i>	<i>M=3.09</i> <i>SD=1.17</i>
2. Colleges today are like most businesses and mainly care about the bottom line*	<i>M=3.88</i> <i>SD=0.99</i>	<i>M=3.87</i> <i>SD=1.05</i>	<i>M=3.73</i> <i>SD=1.11</i>
3. Overall, universities have a positive effect on the way things are going in this country*	<i>M=3.08</i> <i>SD=1.16</i>	<i>M=3.06</i> <i>SD=1.11</i>	<i>M=3.16</i> <i>SD=1.16</i>
4. Universities don't care about making college affordable for people*	<i>M=3.84</i> <i>SD=1.03</i>	<i>M=3.83</i> <i>SD=1.05</i>	<i>M=3.73</i> <i>SD=1.09</i>
	N=382	N=321	N=320

Scale 1-5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Table 4.4: Mean Support for Policy by Treatment Condition

Policy	Conditions		
	<i>Blame Opposing Parties</i>	<i>Blame Universities</i>	<i>No Blame</i>
1. Allow the government to put a lien on the paychecks of people who fail to make student loan payments*	<i>M=2.53 SD=1.35</i>	<i>M=2.54 SD=1.32</i>	<i>M=2.42 SD=1.34</i>
2. Make student loans profit-free for the federal government by eliminating all interest on federal student loans*	<i>M=4.10 SD=0.98</i>	<i>M=4.18 SD=1.01</i>	<i>M=4.11 SD=1.09</i>
3. Require universities to pay back all student loan funds they accepted if their former students prove they cannot afford the payments*	<i>M=3.46 SD=1.19</i>	<i>M=3.42 SD=1.157</i>	<i>M=3.32 SD=1.21</i>
4. Allow universities to determine the amount students can borrow for student loans*	<i>M=3.23 SD=1.26</i>	<i>M=3.17 SD=1.17</i>	<i>M=3.19 SD=1.23</i>
	<i>N=382</i>	<i>N=321</i>	<i>N=320</i>

Scale 1-5 (strongly oppose to strongly support)

Table 4.5: Mediating Effects of Message Credibility on Dimensions of Message and Policy Support

Treatment Comparisons	Dimensions of Message Support				Dimensions of Policy Support			
	Perception of Outgroup				Policy Proposals			
	Message Agreement	Issue Importance	Item 2: Bottom Line	Item 4: Make College Affordable	Policy 1: Gov't Puts Lien on Paychecks	Policy 2: Eliminate Interest on Loans	Policy 3: Universities Pay Back Loan Funds	Policy 4: Universities Decide Amount Students Borrow
<i>Model 1 (N=703)</i>								
Step 1: Blame Opposing Party to Blame Universities	-0.305*** (0.070)							
Step 2: Message Credibility	0.676*** (0.035)							
Blame Opposing Party to Blame Universities	-0.172** (0.567)							
<i>Model 2 (N=702)</i>								
Step 1: Blame Opposing Party to No Blame	-0.288*** (0.077)	0.105 (0.071)	0.194* (0.083)		0.216* (0.106)		0.220* (0.095)	0.211* (0.095)
Step 2: Message Credibility	0.620*** (0.039)	0.266*** (0.041)	0.186*** (0.049)		0.087 (0.064)		0.203*** (0.056)	0.159** (0.057)
Blame Opposing Party to No Blame	-0.202** (0.066)	0.142* (0.069)	0.220** (0.083)		0.228* (0.107)		0.249** (0.094)	0.233* (0.095)
<i>Model 3 (N=641)</i>								
Step 1: Blame Universities to No Blame		0.137* (0.067)	0.202** (0.084)	0.169* (0.085)		0.153 (0.080)		
Step 2: Message Credibility		0.291*** (0.044)	0.356*** (0.055)	0.324*** (0.055)		0.361*** (0.052)		
Blame Universities to No Blame		0.143* (0.065)	0.209** (0.055)	0.176* (0.082)		0.160* (0.077)		

N=1023; Results display OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, two-tailed test.

All models include questions about student loans, political knowledge, participant alignment with message sender party and perception of negativity as control variables.

Table 5.1: Mean Democratic Support by Age Group

Democratic Support	Age Group			
	<i>Under 30</i>	<i>30-45</i>	<i>46-60</i>	<i>Over 60</i>
It's okay for the government to stop people from saying things that are offensive to some groups.	2.94 (1.24)	2.71 (1.27)	2.32 (1.24)	1.97 (1.14)
It is important to have civil rights that protect people's liberty from state oppression.	4.04 (1.04)	4.16 (0.95)	4.31 (0.91)	4.45 (0.81)
a. Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with Congress and elections is a good way of governing this country.	2.88 (1.29)	2.81 (1.27)	2.56 (1.34)	1.85 (1.19)
b. Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country is a good way of governing this country.	3.37 (1.09)	3.21 (1.09)	3.10 (1.16)	2.60 (1.24)
c. Democracy may have its problems, but it's better than any other form of government.	3.49 (1.06)	3.69 (1.05)	3.88 (1.10)	4.40 (0.91)
d. Having a democratic political system is a good way of governing this country.	3.61 (1.17)	3.65 (1.06)	3.81 (1.06)	4.25 (0.91)
Democracy/Autocracy Index (C+D) – (A+B)	0.55 (0.15)	0.58 (0.17)	0.63 (0.20)	0.76 (0.18)
N	271	311	230	211

Standard deviations in parentheses.

Table 5.2: Dependent Variables, Article Three

Dimensions of Democratic Support				
Trust in Institutions				
	<i>Trust in Gov't in D. C.</i>	<i>Trust in Republican Party</i>	<i>Trust in Democratic Party</i>	<i>Trust in Congress</i>
Mean	3.34	3.32	3.46	3.43
SD	1.76	1.90	1.75	1.71
Range	1-7	1-7	1-7	1-7
Support for Democratic Governance and Values				
	<i>Democracy/ Autocracy Index</i>	<i>Post-Material Values</i>	<i>Limit Free Speech</i>	<i>Civil Rights</i>
Mean	0.62	1.99	2.53	4.22
SD	0.19	0.62	1.28	0.95
Range	0-1	1-3	1-5	1-5
Satisfaction with Democratic Governance				
	<i>Satisfied with Democracy</i>	<i>Elections</i>	<i>Gov't is Run for the People</i>	
Mean	1.54	0.94	0.14	
SD	1.01	0.73	0.34	
Range	0-4	0-2	0-1	

N=1023

Table 5.3: Mean Emotions by Treatment Conditions

Emotions	Conditions		
	<i>Blame Opposing Party</i>	<i>Blame Universities</i>	<i>No Blame</i>
<i>Negative Emotions</i>	2.49	2.34	2.18
Disgust	2.69	2.46	2.15
Nervous	2.34	2.19	2.17
Shame	2.35	2.18	2.05
Anger	2.69	2.52	2.27
Sad	2.57	2.50	2.34
Fear	2.28	2.17	2.08
<i>Positive Emotions</i>	2.02	2.14	2.44
Excite	2.05	2.18	2.46
Happy	1.92	2.00	2.30
Hope	2.18	2.44	2.77
Pride	1.94	1.96	2.21
N	382	321	320

Table 5.4: OLS Regression of Emotions on Treatment Comparisons

Emotions	Treatment Comparisons		
	<i>Blame Opposing Party to Blame Universities</i>	<i>Blame Opposing Parties to No Blame</i>	<i>Blame Universities to No Blame</i>
<i>Negative Emotions</i>	0.154* (0.074)	0.310*** (0.072)	0.167* (0.077)
Disgust	0.252** (0.096)	0.543*** (0.096)	0.311** (0.099)
Nervous	0.145 (0.040)	0.172^ (0.091)	0.043 (0.092)
Shame	0.167^ (0.099)	0.301** (0.097)	0.139 (0.100)
Anger	0.175^ (0.098)	0.413*** (0.096)	0.247** (0.101)
Sad	0.069 (0.092)	0.224* (0.090)	0.191^ (0.095)
Fear	0.117 (0.092)	0.208* (0.090)	0.100 (0.094)
<i>Positive Emotions</i>	-0.157* (0.078)	-0.408*** (0.080)	-0.265** (0.081)
Excite	-0.165^ (0.089)	-0.410*** (0.091)	-0.256** (0.092)
Happy	-0.118 (0.088)	-0.374*** (0.090)	-0.272** (0.094)
Hope	-0.294** (0.092)	-0.584*** (0.093)	-0.310** (0.097)
Pride	-0.052 (0.090)	-0.263** (0.094)	-0.221* (0.097)
N	703	702	641

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, ^ $p < 0.10$, standard errors in parentheses.

All models include student loan, political knowledge, and party alignment with message sender as control variables.

Table 5.5: Regression of Dimensions of Democratic Support on Emotions

Emotions	<i>Trust in Gov't in D. C.</i>	<i>Trust in Republican Party</i>	<i>Trust in Democratic Party</i>	<i>Trust in Congress</i>	<i>Democracy/Autocracy Index</i>	<i>Post-Material Values[†]</i>	<i>Limit Free Speech</i>	<i>Civil Rights</i>	<i>Satisfied with Democracy</i>	<i>Elections[†]</i>	<i>Gov't for People[†]</i>
<i>Negative Affect</i>	0.096 [^] (0.057)	0.136** (0.061)	0.148** (0.055)	0.117* (0.055)	-0.021*** (0.006)	-0.102 (0.064)	0.138** (0.040)	-0.094** (0.029)	0.062 [^] (0.032)	0.089 (0.062)	0.033 (0.095)
Disgust	0.077 [^] (0.043)	0.141** (0.046)	0.074 [^] (0.042)	0.039 (0.042)	-0.011** (0.004)	-0.076 (0.049)	0.047 (0.030)	-0.027 (0.022)	0.049* (0.024)	0.102* (0.047)	0.111 (0.071)
Nervous	0.131** (0.046)	0.102* (0.050)	0.124** (0.045)	0.128** (0.045)	-0.018*** (0.005)	-0.105* (0.053)	0.119*** (0.033)	-0.114*** (0.024)	0.095*** (0.026)	0.119* (0.050)	0.047 (0.077)
Shame	0.079 [^] (0.043)	0.094* (0.046)	0.134** (0.042)	0.082* (0.041)	-0.019*** (0.004)	-0.030 (0.048)	0.127*** (0.030)	-0.090*** (0.022)	0.041 [^] (0.024)	0.094* (0.047)	0.032 (0.071)
Anger	0.027 (0.043)	0.052 (0.046)	0.049 (0.042)	0.017 (0.042)	-0.003 (0.004)	0.004 (0.048)	0.031 (0.030)	-0.005 (0.022)	-0.003 (0.024)	0.011 (0.047)	-0.073 (0.073)
Sad	-0.041 (0.046)	-0.006 (0.049)	0.029 (0.045)	0.058 (0.044)	-0.008 [^] (0.005)	-0.075 (0.052)	0.061 [^] (0.032)	-0.026 (0.024)	-0.011 (0.026)	-0.064 (0.050)	-0.055 (0.076)
Fear	0.085 [^] (0.046)	0.113* (0.049)	0.139** (0.045)	0.121** (0.044)	-0.021*** (0.005)	-0.109* (0.052)	0.133*** (0.032)	-0.095*** (0.024)	0.063* (0.026)	0.060 (0.050)	0.058 (0.075)
<i>Positive Affect</i>	0.371*** (0.051)	0.419*** (0.054)	0.260*** (0.051)	0.340*** (0.049)	-0.043*** (0.005)	-0.112 [^] (0.059)	0.269*** (0.036)	-0.102*** (0.027)	0.276*** (0.028)	0.367*** (0.058)	0.393*** (0.083)
Excite	0.285*** (0.045)	0.310*** (0.049)	0.206*** (0.045)	0.283*** (0.044)	-0.033*** (0.005)	-0.074 (0.053)	0.208*** (0.032)	-0.091*** (0.024)	0.219*** (0.025)	0.247*** (0.051)	0.335*** (0.074)
Happy	0.262*** (0.046)	0.293*** (0.049)	0.220*** (0.045)	0.269*** (0.044)	-0.033*** (0.005)	-0.064 (0.053)	0.243*** (0.032)	-0.091*** (0.024)	0.209*** (0.025)	0.277*** (0.051)	0.271*** (0.073)
Hope	0.288*** (0.043)	0.340*** (0.046)	0.168*** (0.043)	0.238*** (0.042)	-0.030*** (0.004)	-0.075 (0.050)	0.169*** (0.031)	-0.031 (0.023)	0.202*** (0.024)	0.283*** (0.048)	0.215** (0.072)
Pride	0.282*** (0.044)	0.318*** (0.047)	0.193*** (0.044)	0.235*** (0.043)	-0.034*** (0.004)	-0.125* (0.051)	0.196*** (0.031)	-0.097*** (0.023)	0.204*** (0.025)	0.281*** (0.049)	0.367*** (0.071)

N=1023; *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, [^] $p < 0.10$, standard errors in parentheses.

All models include student loan, political knowledge, and party alignment with message sender as control variables.

[†]Results reflect OLS regression coefficients except for the Post-Materialist Values Index, elections make the government pay attention to what people think and government is run for the people, which reflect logit coefficients.

Table 5.6: Indirect Effects of Treatment Conditions on Dimensions of Democratic Support via Emotional Response

Dimensions of Democratic Support	Treatment Comparisons		
	<i>Blame Opposing Party to Blame Universities</i> (N=703)	<i>Blame Opposing Parties to No Blame</i> (N=702)	<i>Blame Universities to No Blame</i> (N=641)
Trust in Institutions			
<i>Government in Washington</i>			
Positive Emotions		-0.154*** (0.039)	-0.089** (0.033)
Excite		-0.111*** (0.033)	-0.071** (0.030)
Happy		-0.106** (0.033)	-0.063* (0.037)
Hope	-0.101** (0.035)	-0.173*** (0.041)	-0.072* (0.028)
Pride		-0.076* (0.013)	-0.054* (0.037)
<i>Republican Party</i>			
Disgust		0.072* (0.033)	0.059* (0.026)
Positive Emotions		-0.175*** (0.044)	-0.091** (0.034)
Excite		-0.130*** (0.037)	-0.065* (0.028)
Happy		-0.115** (0.036)	-0.058* (0.026)
Hope	-0.112** (0.039)	-0.194*** (0.045)	-0.089** (0.034)
Pride		-0.088* (0.035)	-0.057* (0.028)
<i>Democratic Party</i>			
Negative Emotions		0.057* (0.025)	
Shame		0.058* (0.024)	
Positive Emotions		-0.094** (0.031)	-0.078** (0.030)
Excite		-0.084** (0.029)	-0.064* (0.027)
Happy		-0.079** (0.028)	-0.064* (0.027)
Hope	-0.052* (0.023)	-0.083* (0.034)	-0.057* (0.024)
<i>Congress</i>			
Negative Emotions		0.047* (0.024)	
Positive Emotions		-0.144*** (0.037)	-0.074** (0.009)
Excite		-0.118*** (0.034)	-0.066* (0.028)
Happy		-0.110*** (0.033)	-0.061* (0.026)
Hope	-0.079** (0.029)	-0.148*** (0.038)	-0.051* (0.023)
Pride		-0.062* (0.026)	
Democratic Governance and Values			
<i>Democracy/ Autocracy Index</i>			
Negative Emotions		-0.007* (0.003)	
Disgust			-0.005* (0.002)
Shame		-0.006* (0.002)	
Positive Emotions		0.020*** (0.004)	0.011** (0.004)
Excite		0.015*** (0.004)	0.008* (0.003)
Happy		0.013*** (0.004)	0.009* (0.003)
Hope	0.009** (0.003)	0.019*** (0.004)	0.009** (0.003)
Pride		0.010** (0.004)	0.007* (0.003)

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, ^ $p < 0.10$, standard errors in parentheses.

All models include student loan, political knowledge, and party alignment with message sender as control variables. Bolded models reflect direct mediation, greyed reflect suppressor effects, all other models reflect indirect mediation.

† Results reflect OLS regression coefficients except for elections make the government pay attention to what people think and government is run for the people, which reflect logit coefficients.

Table 5.5: Indirect Effects of Treatment Conditions on Dimensions of Democratic Support via Emotional Response, continued

Dimensions of Democratic Support	Treatment Comparisons		
	<i>Blame Opposing Party to Blame Universities</i> (N=703)	<i>Blame Opposing Parties to No Blame</i> (N=702)	<i>Blame Universities to No Blame</i> (N=641)
Democratic Governance and Values, cont.			
<i>Protect Free Speech</i>			
Negative Emotions		0.049* (0.019)	
Shame		0.044* (0.018)	
Fear		0.034* (0.017)	
Positive Emotions		-0.125*** (0.031)	-0.072** (0.025)
Excite		-0.098*** (0.027)	-0.048* (0.020)
Happy		-0.103*** (0.029)	-0.066** (0.025)
Hope	-0.043* (0.018)	-0.109*** (0.029)	-0.062** (0.023)
Pride		-0.060* (0.024)	-0.037* (0.018)
<i>Civil Rights</i>			
Negative Emotions		-0.036** (0.014)	
Shame		-0.029* (0.012)	
Fear		-0.022* (0.011)	
Positive Emotions		0.047** (0.016)	
Excite		0.040** (0.015)	
Happy		0.038** (0.014)	
Hope	0.024* (0.011)		
Pride		0.030* (0.013)	
Satisfaction with Democratic Governance			
<i>Satisfied with Democracy</i>			
Negative Emotions		0.032* (0.014)	
Disgust		0.037* (0.017)	
Positive Emotions		-0.110*** (0.026)	-0.067** (0.023)
Excite		-0.083*** (0.022)	-0.052* (0.011)
Happy		-0.078*** (0.022)	-0.049* (0.019)
Hope	-0.059** (0.021)	-0.123*** (0.026)	-0.054** (0.020)
Pride		-0.050* (0.020)	-0.041* (0.019)
<i>Gov't for the People†</i>			
Positive Emotions		-0.146* (0.072)	
<i>Elections†</i>			
Positive Emotions		-0.164* (0.073)	
Hope		-0.182** (0.070)	

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, ^ $p < 0.10$, standard errors in parentheses.

All models include student loan, political knowledge, and party alignment with message sender as control variables. Bolded models reflect direct mediation, greyed reflect suppressor effects, all other models reflect indirect mediation.

† Results reflect OLS regression coefficients except for elections make the government pay attention to what people think and government is run for the people, which reflect logit coefficients.

APPENDIX B: FIGURES

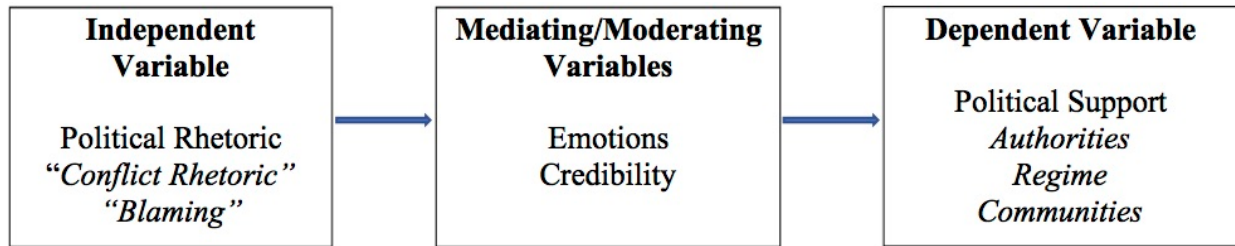


Figure 2.1: The Relationship between Conflict Rhetoric and Political Support

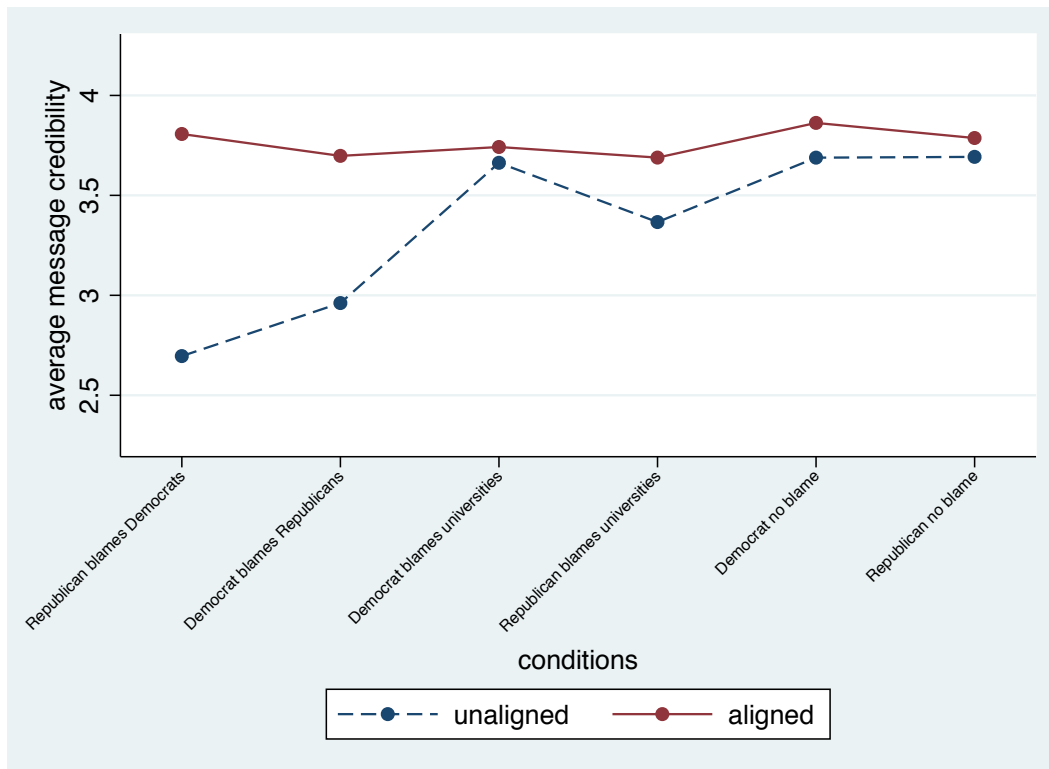


Figure 4.1: Mean Message Credibility by Participant and Message Sender Party Alignment

Note: Alignment means that the message sender and participant identify with the same political party

APPENDIX C: EXPERIMENTAL TREATMENT FOR ARTICLE ONE

**Conditions 1-4 – Democrat blames Republicans or Universities, Republican blames Democrats or Universities*

[Republican/Democratic] Representative Robert Murphy blames [Democrats/Republicans/universities] for not doing enough to address the problems of student loan debt and soaring costs that have inflated tuition rates. “The [Democrats/ Republicans/universities] are proposing policy changes that won’t slow the rising cost of college and won’t lower total debt owed and payments to a manageable level,” Mr. Murphy said. “Listening to [Democrats/Republicans/universities] will make this crisis worse.”

**Conditions 5-6 – Democrat with no target of blame, Republican with no target of blame*

[Republican/Democratic] Representative Robert Murphy wants to address the problems of student loan debt and soaring costs that have inflated tuition rates. “Current policy changes won't slow the rising cost of college and won't lower total debt owed and payments to a manageable level,” Mr. Murphy said.

APPENDIX D: EXPERIMENTAL TREATMENT FOR ARTICLES TWO AND THREE

**Conditions 1-4 – Democrat blames Republicans or Universities, Republican blames Democrats or Universities*

The Federal Reserve released on Wednesday the latest statistics about student loan debt. Over two-thirds of college graduates leave school with some student loan debt. In total, student loan debt has topped \$1.7 trillion and measures more than 6% of overall national debt. More than 11% of student loan borrowers are behind on their payments or in default.

In a series of tweets yesterday, [Democratic/Republican] Representative Brad Young blamed [Democrats/Republicans/Universities] for not doing enough to address the problems of crippling student loan debt and soaring costs that have inflated tuition rates:

Student loan debt is out of control and harming our economy because

[Democrats/Republicans/Universities] have pushed disastrous policies that do nothing to lower tuition rates or the debt students are forced to take on.

Self-seeking [Democrats/Republicans/Universities] say they care about inequality, but they keep backing ineffective policies that just make college more expensive.

If we keep listening to [Democrats'/Republicans'/Universities'] dishonest claims, the student loan debt crisis will only get worse and soon higher education will be out of reach for most people.

-- Representative Brad Young (@RepBradYoung) February 10, 2018

**Conditions 5-6 – Democrat with no target of blame, Republican with no target of blame*

The Federal Reserve released on Wednesday the latest statistics about student loan debt. Over two-thirds of college graduates leave school with some student loan debt. In total, student loan debt has topped \$1.7 trillion and measures more than 6% of overall national debt. More than 11% of student loan borrowers are behind on their payments or in default.

In a series of tweets yesterday, [Democratic/Republican] Representative Brad Young commented on the effort to address the student loan debt crisis:

Student loan debt is out of control and is harming our economy.

Current policies do nothing to lower tuition rates or the debt students are forced to take on.

We need to work together to put policies in place that fix the problem.

-- Representative Brad Young (@RepBradYoung) February 10, 2018

APPENDIX E: SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR ARTICLE ONE

Pre-Test Questions

Q1. How familiar are you with proposals for student loan debt reform?

A: Not at all familiar...very familiar (5-point scale)

Q2: In your opinion, how important an issue is student loan debt reform?

A: Not at all important...Very important (5-point scale)

Q3: How concerned are you about the issue of student loan debt reform?

A: Not at all concerned...Very concerned (5-point scale)

Q4: As a student, do you expect to have student loan debt upon graduation?

A: Yes/no

Q5: In politics people sometimes talk of liberal and conservative. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means very liberal and 7 means very conservative?

A: very liberal ... very conservative

Post-test Questions

Q1: Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat or an Independent?

A: Republican, Democrat, Independent

If Republican or Democrat on Q1:

Q2a: Below is a scale with strong Democrats on one end and strong Republicans on the other. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

A: Strong Democrats...Strong Republicans

If Independent on Q1:

Q2b: Do you generally lean toward the Republican or Democratic Party?

A: Republican Party, Democratic Party, Neither

Q3-12: Using the scale below, please indicate how well the following statements describe how you feel. *Republican or Democrat substituted.*

A: Does not describe my feelings...Clearly describes my feelings

- When someone criticizes my political party it feels like a personal insult.
- I don't act like the typical member of my political party.
- I'm very interested in what others think about my political party.
- The limitations associated with my political party apply to me also.
- When I talk about my political party I usually say "we" rather than "they."
- I have a number of qualities typical of members of my political party.
- My political party's successes are my successes.
- If a story in the media criticized my political party, I would feel embarrassed.
- When someone praises my political party, it feels like a personal compliment.
- I act like a member of my political party to a great extent.

Q13-16: On the scales below, please indicate the degree to which the following statement represents what you believe:

[Republicans/Democrats] would do a better job dealing with student loan reform.

A: Disagree...Agree

True...False

Q17-18: On a scale from 0 to 10, please indicate how you feel about the Republican Party, with 10 meaning a very warm, favorable feeling, 0 meaning a very cold, unfavorable feeling, and 5 meaning not particularly warm or cold.

A: 0 (very cold, unfavorable feeling)...10 (very warm, favorable feeling)

Demographic Variables

Q7: What is your age?

A: [Input box] years

Q8: What is your gender?

A: Male, Female, Other

Q9: What is your ethnicity?

A: Asian, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Black or African American, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, White, Other

Q10: What is the highest level of education you have completed?

A: Less than High School, High school graduate, Some college, Associate's Degree, Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree, Professional Degree, Doctorate

Q11: What is your household income?

A: drop-down menu

APPENDIX F: SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR ARTICLES TWO AND THREE

Pre-Test Questions

Q1. How familiar or unfamiliar are you with the ongoing student loan debt crisis?

A: Not at all familiar...very familiar (5-point scale)

Q2: How much attention do you think the student loan debt crisis is receiving from lawmakers?

Would you say it is receiving the right amount of attention, it should receive more attention, it should receive less attention, or are you unsure?

A: Receiving the right amount of attention, should receive more attention, should receive less attention, not sure

Q3. Do you have now or did you have in the past student loan debt?

A: Yes/no

Q4. In your experience, how easy or difficult is it to make student loan debt payments?

A: very easy...very difficult (5-point scale)

Post-test Questions for Article Two

Q1: To what extent do you agree or disagree with Representative Young's tweets about the student loan debt crisis?

A: Strongly disagree...Strongly agree (5-point scale)

Q2: There are many important problems facing our country today. In your opinion, how important or unimportant a problem is the student loan debt crisis?

A: Not at all important...Extremely important (5-point scale)

Q19: Overall, would you say that Representative Young's tweets were positive or negative?

A: Very negative...very positive (5-point scale)

Q20-22: How poorly or well do the following adjectives describe Representative Young's tweets?

A: describes very poorly ... describes very well (5-point scale)

- accurate
- authentic
- believable

Q23-25: Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding Representative's Young's tweets:

A: Strong disagree...strongly agree (5-point scale)

- Representative Young's tweets are offensive
- I would call Representative Young's tweets polite
- The tone of Representative Young's tweets is hostile.

Q26-29: Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about universities/colleges:

A: Strongly Disagree ... Strongly Agree (5-point scale)

- Colleges today are mostly interested in making sure students have a good educational experience.
- Colleges today are like most businesses and mainly care about the bottom line.
- Overall, universities have a positive effect on the way things are going in this country.
- Universities don't care about making college affordable for people.

Q30: We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or

inexpensively. Please indicate whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount of money on dealing with the student loan debt crisis.

A: Too much money, too little money, or about the right amount of money

Q6-9: Please indicate how much you oppose or support each policy intervention listed below as a way to deal with the student loan debt crisis:

A: Strongly Oppose ... Strongly Support (5-point scale)

- Allow the government to put a lien on the paychecks of people who fail to make student loan payments.
- Make student loans profit-free for the federal government by eliminating all interest on federal student loans.
- Require universities to pay back all student loan funds they accepted if their former students prove they cannot afford the payments.
- Allow universities to determine the amount students can borrow for student loans.

Post-test Questions for Article Three

Q1-5: There are many different institutions in this country, for example, the government, courts, police, civil servants. Please indicate on the 7-point scale below, where 1 represents great distrust and 7 represents great trust, how much is your personal trust in each of the following:

A: Great distrust... great trust (7-point scale)

- The government in Washington
- The Democratic Party
- The Republican Party

- Congress
- Universities

Q10: Would you say that the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all people?

A: A few big interests, for the benefit of all people

Q11: How much do you feel that having elections makes the government pay attention to what people think?

A: Not so much, some, a good deal

Q12: On the whole, are you extremely satisfied, very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in the United States?

A: not at all satisfied ... extremely satisfied (5-point scale)

Q13-18: Below are statements describing various political systems. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

A: strongly disagree ... strongly agree (5-point scale)

- A good way of governing this country is having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country.
- It is important to have civil rights that protect people's liberty from state oppression.
- Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with Congress and elections is a good way of governing this country.
- Having a democratic political system is a good way of governing this country.
- It's okay for the government to stop people from saying things that are offensive to some

groups.

- Democracy may have its problems, but it's better than any other form of government.

Q19: People differ in assigning priority or importance to various goals. If you had to choose among the following things, which are the two that seem most desirable to you?

- Maintain order in the nation
- Give people more say in the decisions of the government
- Fight rising prices
- Protect free speech

Q20-29: This scale consists of a number of words that describe different feelings and emotions.

Read each item and indicate to what extent Representative Young's tweets about the student loan debt crisis make you feel this way right now.

A: Not at all...extremely (5-point scale)

Excited	Hopeful
Disgusted	Angry
Nervous	Sad,
Happy	Proud
Ashamed	Afraid

Demographic Variables

Q1-3: Next are some questions about our government. Many people don't know the answers to these questions, so if there are some you don't know, please indicate this.

Q1: Which job or political office is now held by Mike Pence?

A: open text box

Q2: Which party held the majority in the U.S. House of Representatives before the 2016 election?

A: Republicans, Democrats, don't know

Q3: Which party would you say is more conservative?

A: Republicans, Democrats, don't know

Q4: In politics people sometimes talk of liberal and conservative. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means very liberal and 7 means very conservative?

A: 0, very liberal ... 7, very conservative

Q5: Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, Independent or what?

A: Republican, Democrat, Independent, other

Q6a: IF REP OR DEM on Q5:

Below is a scale with strong Democrats on one end and strong Republicans on the other. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

A: Strong Democrat...Strong Republican (7-point scale)

Q6b: IF IND or OTHER on Q5:

Do you generally lean toward the Republican or Democratic Party?

A: Republican, Democrat, Neither

Q7: What is your age?

A: [Input box] years

Q8: What is your gender?

A: Male, Female, Other

Q9: What is your ethnicity?

A: Asian, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Black or African American, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, White, Other

Q10: What is the highest level of education you have completed?

A: Less than High School, High School graduate, Some college, Associate's Degree, Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree, Professional Degree, Doctorate

Q11: What is your household income?

A: drop-down menu

VITA

Katharine Sara Gomez was born in New York, NY, to Irna and Joseph Gomez. She has one older sister, Amanda. She attended Monroe Elementary School, Chalk Hill Middle School and Masuk High School in Monroe, CT. After graduation, Katharine attended the University of Vermont in Burlington, VT where she majored in English and minored in Italian and Political Science. She completed a Bachelor's of Arts degree in 1999. After graduation, Katharine moved to New York, NY and worked in a variety of industries before returning to school. In 2004, Katharine earned a Master's of Arts degree in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from New York University. She worked in human resources for a few years before moving to Connecticut and leaving the workforce to raise her children, Henry and Grace. Katharine moved to Chattanooga, TN in 2013 and accepted a Graduate Teaching Assistantship from the University of Tennessee's Department of Political Science in 2014. She earned a Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Tennessee in 2018. Katharine and her family now reside in New York, NY.